Participating in the musical tradition of *prejjem*:
Transmitting the guitar culture of *għana* within and between insular musical communities of islanders in Malta and the Maltese-Australian diaspora

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Andrew Pace

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
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Accompanying DVD track listing

**Track 1.** Second session of *ghana spiritu pront* recorded in Victor Borg’s garage, Sydney, Australia, 19th November 1989 (Cutajar et al. 1989). (44’47’’)

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Abstract

Prejjem is a style of guitar music that is practiced in the Maltese islands and its diaspora as part of the għana folksinging tradition. Although għana has been studied by a number of ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, sociologists and linguists, its guitar aspect has been almost entirely overlooked by academia. Emerging in Malta over a century ago, prejjem is analogous to the guitar component of flamenco or fado. It, too, is a complex improvised guitar tradition that serves to accompany and complement a vocal tradition and which simultaneously exists as a separate instrumental ensemble practice. Guitarists maintain a close-knit association with the għana community, but they also engage in a set of activities and behaviours with one another that are unique to their position within it. In this thesis, I examine both the social and musical attributes of prejjem and its communities of guitarists, employing a range of methodologies and theories drawn from a number of disciplines to reveal the totality of the practice as it exists in Malta and its diaspora (specifically Australia). Drawing extensively upon ethnographic fieldwork research that I have undertaken in Malta and Australia, I explore the material culture of prejjem, its musical forms, its history, its performance environments, the sociability of its participants and the means by which performers develop musical ability. These topics are bound together as a holistic investigation into how knowledge about prejjem exists in the għana community, how social factors shape the forms of this knowledge and, most importantly, how this knowledge is transmitted and transformed as it passes between members of this community.
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Brief notes on Maltese language orthography

The alphabet of Malti, the Maltese language, comprises twenty-nine characters, of which the following will be unfamiliar to English speakers (Aquilina 1965:12-15):

- Ċ ċ: sounding as ‘ch’ in ‘church’
- Ġ ġ: as ‘j’ in ‘John’
- GH gh: unpronounced; used to lengthen preceding or following vowel
- Ħ ħ: as ‘h’ in ‘horse’, but stronger
- Ż ħ: as ‘z’ in ‘buzz’

A few of the most common Maltese words that I use in this thesis are listed below along with translations and approximations of their correct pronunciation:

- *Ghana* (a traditional form of Maltese folk music): aa-na
- *Prejjem* (the guitar component of *ghana*): pray-yem (‘j’ formed as ‘y’ of ‘yes’)
- *Prim* (the lead guitarist): preem
- *Ghannej / ghannejja* (folksinger / folksingers): aa-nay / aa-nay-ya
- *Daqqaqa* (collective term for musicians): da-a’-a’ (‘q’ formed by a glottal stop)

Plurals can take a number of configurations depending on the form of the final syllable and its etymology. For example, *kitarrist* (guitarist) becomes *kitarristi*; *ghannej* becomes *ghannejja*; *ghanja* (an *ghana* verse) becomes *ghanjiet*. 
INTRODUCTION
Fig. 1. Map of the Maltese islands (www.mappery.com/map-of/Malta-Map-2).
This thesis examines ghana, a traditional form of folksinging with guitar accompaniment that occurs in the central Mediterranean Maltese islands and its diaspora (see map, figure 1).² Performed almost exclusively by men, ghana is most often encountered in small village bars, clubs and in homes, but is also incorporated into more conspicuous formal occasions such as village saints’ festivals (festi) and national cultural events. Those individuals who participate most fully in ghana constitute close-knit communities of friends and family who often maintain associative ties beyond the performance event itself. Ghana is typically viewed by its practitioners (and its scholars) as a forum in which ghannejja (“folksingers”) can debate issues of social standing, cultural identity, masculinity, history, language and migration in an insular, convivial, communal setting among friends. In this thesis, however, I focus on prejjem, the guitar component of ghana that exists as a subset of activities and behaviours within the ghana community and to which comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid. Kitarristi (ghana guitarists) do identify with the issues that are raised and debated through ghana, but they also face a range of other concerns that pertain to their particular musical and social position within the ghana community. It is the kitarristi’s ‘world’ that I examine in this thesis. I explore prejjem’s material culture, its musical forms, its history, its performance environments, the sociability of its participants and the means by which performers develop musical ability.

Despite a resurgence of academic and populist interest in ghana since the 1990s, it remains a social activity that is enjoyed by a relatively small number of working class Maltese. This has led it to be a somewhat “closed shop” (to borrow a phrase from Maltese-Australian folklorist Manuel Casha), as far as outsiders are concerned, for much of its centuries-long existence. Accordingly, although a small number of excellent

² When I refer to “Malta” in this thesis I also imply its sister island of Gozo. Although there are Gozitan daqqqaqa and ghana occasions, the majority of performances occur in Malta. Malta’s other inhabited island, Comino, is home to only four permanent residents.
scholarly publications have appeared since the late 1940s, the vast majority of these deal with ghana as a performance object. Few have considered ghana in more holistic terms, as a complex set of social interactions and processes that manifest beyond its ultimate performance on stage. Furthermore, the majority of these works have been concerned with the vocal component of ghana and the themes and dynamics of its debates, rather than paying attention to the guitar aspect. This thesis aims to address these lacunae in ghana scholarship by investigating how knowledge about prejjem exists in the ghana community, how social factors shape the forms of this knowledge and, most importantly, how this knowledge is transmitted and transformed as it passes between members of this community. I provide a much-needed diachronic perspective on the activities of kitarristi, taking an interdisciplinary methodological approach that foregrounds the transmission and transformation of prejjem’s tangible and intangible components. By focusing on transmission rather than product (the aforementioned performance object), I am able to examine the immediate transferrals of knowledge that sustain the activities of the community and also the long-term shifts in attitudes toward these various interconnected components. Additionally, by exploring the ghana community from the perspective of its kitarristi I am able to shed light on the social networks and modes of communication that underpin the community and support the activities of its members.

Introducing ghana and prejjem

Ghana is a form of music-making that has been enacted in the Maltese islands for centuries. It is a monodic vocal form comprised of four-line, octosyllabic (8-7-8-7) stanzas in abcb rhyme scheme that are sung to a very small body of melodies and accompanied by an acoustic guitar ensemble. In most of ghana’s subforms musical interest is developed by ghannejja through linguistic proficiency rather than by musical
virtuosity. Historical accounts suggest that a range of instruments once accompanied ghana, but by the early twentieth century these had fallen out of favour and were replaced by the European guitar (see Borg Cardona 2002:15-20; 2014:9; Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:11-31). Over the following decades ghana’s guitar component rapidly advanced in complexity and its practitioners began to gain recognition. By the mid-twentieth century the guitar style had been labelled as prejjem.

Prejjem specifically refers to the characteristic melodies that the prim kitarrist (“lead guitarist”) improvises over the chordal accompaniment that is supplied by his two akkumpanjisti (“accompaniment guitarists”) during the interludes between each vocal stanza. Prejjem also exists in an instrumental tradition known as kitarri biss (“guitars only”) that follows similar musical structures as ghana, but in which no ghannejja participate. It is prejjem – its music, its contexts and its community – that I focus on in this thesis.

Today, five main forms of ghana are recognised by daqqaqa (the collective term for ghannejja and kitarristi), all of which feature guitar accompaniment: ghana tal-fatt, poezija, ghana fil-gholi, makjetta and ghana spirtu pront. Other subgenres of ghana exist, but tend to be understood by daqqaqa as variations within these forms. An ghana tal-fatt (“factual song”) is a ballad sung by one ghannej who relates an accurate, detailed narrative of a real-life event, such as a disaster, tragedy or scandal, or a notable biography. A poezija (“poem”) is identical in structure to a fatt, but its text may be on any theme. Għana fil-gholi (“on a high pitch”) is a highly melismatic vocal form whose (often indistinct) lyrics resemble “an impromptu haiku-like sung poem” (McLeod and Herndon 1975:87) composed of traditional stanzas that are sung by one, or sometimes

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2 A number of taxonomies of ghana have been determined by scholars: Micheline Galley and Ġużè Cassar Pullicino (1996:72) identify two main genres of ghana; Philip Ciantar (2000), Paul Sant Cassia (2000:282-285) and Ranier Fsadni (1992; 1993:337-339) identify three; and Ġorġ Mifsud Chircop (2003:188-212) identifies four, subdivided into fourteen subgenres (later reduced to ten (Mifsud Chircop 2004:153-160)).
two, specialist ghannejja. A makjetta, a relatively modern form of ghana popularised in the 1950s, is a short, uptempo song on a humorous theme sung by one or two ghannejja. Ghana spirtu pront (“quick spirit”) is by far the most commonly encountered form of ghana. Sung between two or three pairs of ghannejja, ghana spirtu pront is an improvised verbal duel in which topics are debated (sometimes heatedly) with the aim of outdoing one’s opponent in general knowledge, wit and linguistic ability. If there are four ghannejja performing, the first singer will be paired in debate with the third and the second singer with the fourth, each delivering one stanza in sequence, as in figure 2. If there are six ghannejja, then the first and fourth, second and fifth, and third and sixth ghannejja will be paired, as in figure 3. Each ghannej is usually given sixteen stanzas in which to improvise a debate against his opponent. Between each ghannej’s verse is a guitar interlude stanza (an qalba) in which the prim kitarrist improvises on traditional prejjem melodies. Each session of ghana spirtu pront will typically last between forty-five minutes and an hour. Two or three sessions of ghana spirtu pront are usually held on each occasion.

![Diagram](image)

Fig. 2. Sequence and pairing of four opponents in ghana spirtu pront.
The most commonly encountered ghana occasion is held from 10am every Sunday morning (traditionally after morning Mass) in a number of small bars across Malta. Here, close-knit groups of some fifteen to twenty men will congregate for a few hours to sing, drink and talk together before they return home for lunch. A more organised though less frequent occasion is held during the evening in these same venues, or sometimes in a town square or other public setting. Known as a serata, this type of occasion draws a larger, often more diverse crowd than do the Sunday morning events. Another type of regular performance occasion are the informal gatherings in the homes and garages of daqqqaqa to which close friends are invited for an afternoon or evening of music and socialising. In the Maltese diaspora a handful of Maltese social clubs replace village bars as hubs of ghana activity, featuring weekly or monthly ghana evenings that are usually well-attended. As in Malta, casual get-togethers in Australia are often hosted in homes and garages. Both Maltese and Australian contexts for ghana feature in this thesis.

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3 Marcia Herndon provides a more complete list of nine types of performance occasion (in Herndon and McLeod 1993:159-167); however, the three occasions I describe here are the most common.
These convivial occasions manifest in contexts and environments that are primarily associated with male sociability. *Ghana spirtu pront* in particular is seen as a combative space in which men display exaggerated masculine behaviour in their battle to outdo one another in song (Fsadni 1993:345-346; Klein 2005a:58, 69). *Ghana*’s traditional public performance spaces tend to be male-gendered: *każinija* (band, football and political party clubs), *hanuti* (bars and wine shops) and *boċċi* (boules) clubs. In Malta these are not spaces that women traditionally associate with (Boissevain 2006:53; Borg and Mayo 1994:219-220; McLeod and Herndon 1975:84; Mitchell 2002:77-79). However, in the Maltese diaspora, where *ghana*’s performance spaces tend not to be so heavily male-gendered, we encounter greater female participation in *ghana* as audience members and also, in a handful of instances, as *daqqaqa*. In both Malta and Australia the demographic of those who participate in *ghana* in active roles are, nevertheless, almost entirely male and typically middle-aged or older (although there are a handful of younger *daqqaqa* in their teens and twenties). Because of this overwhelming gender bias and for the sake of intelligibility I apply masculine pronouns to *daqqaqa* throughout this thesis.

Despite Malta and Gozo having a current resident population of nearly 425,000, only a very small proportion are involved in *ghana* as *daqqaqa*. Other musical opportunities are seemingly more attractive to young Maltese: village brass bands remain very popular intergenerational activities that involve thousands of Maltese in regular performance and rehearsal occasions across the islands (Boissevain 2005; Campbell 2008; Jacob 2014; Mitchell 2002), whilst the draw of popular music-making remains ever-present (M3P 2013a; 2013b). Figures are difficult to estimate for *ghana*,

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4 Although none are regular performers, I am aware of five female *ghannejja* and two female *kitarristi* who are presently active in Malta and Australia (and a further two female *kitarristi* in Australia who no longer perform). One female return emigrant to Malta laments what she misses most about her years in Sydney are the regular evenings of *ghana* that she had attended with her husband and friends and the opportunities she had there to sing. She no longer sings in Malta and only attends *ghana* at larger, more public events.
but a list of active *daqqaqa* in Malta and Gozo compiled by Ġorg Mifsud Chircop in 1999 identifies 121 *ghannejja* and 56 *kitarristi*; in the diaspora, namely Australia, Canada and the USA, there were a further 75 *ghannejja* and 47 *kitarristi* (Ragonesi and Chircop 1999:69-102). Today’s numbers remain similar: in a recent survey, Steve Borg suggests there to be around 250 active participants in Malta (Steve Borg personal communication 2013; see also M3P 2013c). However, the communities that exist around *daqqaqa* are much larger, incorporating *oganajzers* (organisers of events, who are often bar or club owners or own spaces that can be adapted for *ghana* performances), *dilettanti* (aficionados who follow *ghana*) and general audience members. All of these roles form the ‘*ghana* community’ that provides the context for this thesis.

Although *daqqaqa* often describe *ghana* as “folklore” – and confirm it as something of a vocation, claiming that one is born with the ability to bear the tradition (Brincat 2009; Fsadni 1993:348-359; Galley and Cassar Pullicino 1996:72-73; Tanti interview 2013a; Vella interview 2012) – this does not mean that its activities are necessarily ‘traditional’ and inflexible. Paul Sant Cassia describes *ghana* rather as a “symbol of traditionalism”, an activity through which the relationship between tradition and modernity can be redefined (Sant Cassia 2000:282). Timothy Rice conceives of tradition in similar terms: “The conscious encounter with tradition creates a tension between the world it once referenced and the modern world it must be made to reference” (Rice 1994:15). Those who participate in *ghana* do so in a number of ways for a variety of reasons; they are unified by sharing *ghana* as an experience, but what that experience means is determined on an individual basis. Indeed, there is a degree of ambivalence toward *ghana* among its participants: some prefer the guitar component, others avidly follow the *ghannejja*; some see performances as transcendent experiences, others as a comforting sonic backdrop to other forms of socialisation. All, however,
view *ghana* as an enjoyable social occasion – ultimately *ghana* is about entertainment. For those in the *ghana* community, tradition and folklore are terms they use to confirm the heritage of their activity, but *ghana* performances are not discrete events that end when *daqqaqa* shake hands and leave the stage: *daqqaqa*, in particular, live the tradition. In general conversation it is not unusual to find *ghannejja* speaking in the same linguistic turns and metaphors that they use in *ghana spirtu pront* and to continue engaging in playful antagonistic behaviour with one another. Many *daqqaqa* socialise together outside of the performance environment and are, in fact, often tied to one another via extended kinship networks. *Ghana*’s performative realm often overlaps with everyday life.

An overview of historical and contemporary *ghana* research

The earliest depictions of *ghana* appear in a number of travelogues and accounts of the islands produced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Guignard 1791; Boisgelin 1805; Bigelow 1831; Badger 1838; Miege 1840; Vassallo 1851; al-Shidyâq 1855 (for overviews see Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:11-17)). However, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that folklore scholars began to examine *ghana* in greater detail, specifically from a linguistic perspective. A number of contemporary *ghanja* stanzas were published by the Italian Luigi Bonelli in the late 1890s, and by the German folklore scholar Hans Stumme in 1904 and in collaboration with Bertha Ilg in 1909 (see Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:17-21; also Koessler-Ilg and Cassar Pullicino 1962). Folk tales were also collected and published during this period by the Maltese priest Emmanuel Magri (who published a series of collected stories between 1899 and 1907), by R. N. Bradley in 1912 and Margaret Murray and Liża Galea in 1932 (see Cassar Pullicino 2000:xi-xiv).
It was not until after the Second World War that various branches of Maltese folklore studies began to be unified, principally through the efforts of celebrated Maltese folklorist Ġużè Cassar Pullicino. Up to this period, Cassar Pullicino asserts, antipathy among the islands’ educated classes toward the Maltese language had led to the majority of Maltese folklore collections being made by foreign scholars (Cassar Pullicino 1947:328). This would change in the post-war era largely due to the nationalist impulse of the time. Cassar Pullicino published extensively between the mid-1940s and the 1990s on a variety of local topics including ġhana, folk tales, proverbs, customs, nicknames, costume, carnival and festa. His works from this period were collected and republished retrospectively in three volumes: *Studies in Maltese folklore* in 1976 (a second, more authoritative edition appeared in 1992), *Studi di tradizioni popolari Maltesi* (1989), and *Maltese oral poetry and folk music* in collaboration with the Maltese composer Charles Camilleri (1998). The latter publication is still considered the main reference source for ġhana even though much of its material was originally published between 1944 and 1962. Pullicino and Camilleri’s chapters on the Maltese guitar present a number of transcribed melodies – what appear to be the first published transcriptions of prejjem – although some details of the guitar ensemble and its tuning unfortunately suffer from inaccuracies and editorial errors.

Most of the authoritative texts on ġhana date from the 1990s onward, reflecting a period of increased scholarly interest in the tradition: Ranier Fsadni (1993) analyses the sociability and politics of ġhana spirtu pront among its practitioners, Paul Sant Cassia (2000; also 1989) examines how ġhana has been interpreted and “rediscovered” in contemporary Malta, Philip Ciantar (2000) presents an ethnography of ġhana spirtu pront performance, Anna Borg Cardona surveys Maltese forms of music making

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5 The Maltese language was in fact only afforded the status of an official language in 1934. Previously, Italian and English were predominant among the educated classes (Aquilina 1994:viii; Brincat 2004:220; also Aquilina 1964).
through history (2002) and provides a detailed study of local instruments (2014), Ġorġ Mifsud Chircop describes *ghana’s* forms and history (2003; 2004) and in collaboration with Anita Ragonesi lists its practitioners, venues and a comprehensive bibliography of resources on the tradition (Ragonesi and Chircop 1999), Ruben Zahra (2006) features chapters on the guitar and *ghana* in his *Guide to Maltese folk music*, Marced Zahra Sacco (2011) presents an intriguing portrait of the life of the celebrated *ghannej* Frans Baldacchino *il-Budaj*, and Andrew Alamango (2010; 2011) details commercially released *ghana* recordings of the early 1930s. Outside of Malta, studies have also been made among Maltese communities in Australia: Kevin Bradley (1997) presents an excellent ethnographic study of the guitar and *kitarristi*, Mary Rose Grech (2003) and Eve Klein (2005a; 2005b) examine Maltese identity among diasporic *ghana* communities in Melbourne, and the many radio shows, presentations and lectures made since the mid-1980s by Maltese-Australian folklorist Manuel Casha cover a range of socio-musical issues. A very small number of ‘foreign’ scholars – those without Maltese heritage – have also contributed incisive works: Kevin Bradley’s work has already been noted, but there is also Annette Erler’s (1998) study of gender differences in *ghana tal-fatt* and the ethnographic research on *ghana* undertaken by Marcia Herndon (1971; 1987) and her collaborations with Norma McLeod (1975; 1980; 1993). This very brief annotated bibliography is by no means a complete list of all the resources that deal with *ghana*, but it does give an overview of key scholarly resources. However, of these only three provide details of *ghana’s* guitar component: Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri’s 1998 collection, Bradley’s 1997 dissertation and Herndon’s 1971 thesis (and her subsequent publications with McLeod that reinterpret some of her theories (1980; 1993)). Yet, errors appear in two of these otherwise invaluable works: issues with
Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri’s book have already been noted and some of Herndon’s interpretive analyses are also open to question.\(^6\)

I cannot conclude this section without offering a brief overview of the literature on Maltese migration, a topic that features prominently in the final chapter of this thesis. Mass emigration from Malta to destinations such as Australia, Canada, the USA and England has been the greatest source of social upheaval (and trauma) for the Maltese throughout the twentieth century. I have met very few Maltese whose families have not been divided by population movement – my own included. Emigration intensified immediately after the Second World War as overpopulation and underemployment reached a crisis point. Aided by government-sponsored programmes, such as the Australian assisted passage scheme that was introduced in 1948, between 1946 and 1996 155,000 Maltese left the islands (although figures began to drop dramatically after the mid-1970s), 87,000 of whom chose Australia as their new home (Cauchi 1999:15-17). In the 2011 Australian census 41,000 individuals living there claimed to have been born in Malta, with an additional 164,000 identifying as second (and subsequent) generation Maltese (Cauchi 2014:4). A more detailed portrait of migration is outside the scope of this thesis, but a great deal of research has been undertaken on the topic. Among the most prominent works, Maurice Cauchi (1990; 1999; 2009), Albert Agius (2001; 2004) and Barry York (1986; 1990; 1998) have written about Maltese in Australia, George Bonavia (1980), Carmel Borg and Simon Mayo (1994) and Richard Cumbo and John Portelli (1997) on Maltese in Canada, Geoff Dench (1975) about Maltese in London, Andrea Smith (2006) and Joshua Hayes (2010) on Maltese in Algeria, Diane Andreassi (2011) and Joseph Lubig (2011) on Maltese in the USA and

\(^6\) I do not find it a coincidence that the only error-free academic study of \textit{prejjem} is made by Kevin Bradley, a guitarist himself. Manuel Casha, whose work on \textit{prejjem} is similarly accurate, also happens to be a guitarist. \textit{Prejjem} is a tradition that requires a great deal of unspoken theoretical knowledge to fully comprehend it, much of which can only be understood through a practical understanding of the guitar itself.
Lawrence Attard (2003; 2007) about worldwide Maltese emigration from the nineteenth century to the present day.

**My research methodologies**

Very few texts on ġhana provide an ethnographic perspective on its performances and associated activities – Bradley (1997), Ciantar (2000), Grech (2003), Herndon (1971) and Klein (2005a) being the notable exceptions. However useful other resources are for comprehending the forms and structures of ġhana, non-ethnographic approaches tend to diminish the significance of the human element of performance, specifically the interactions between individuals that enable the forms, practices and spaces of ġhana to exist. In an attempt to balance this bias, my thesis is fundamentally an ethnographic work in which I examine the prejjem component of ġhana from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, exploring the ġhana community holistically as an interlocking cultural matrix of people and activities. To apply Conrad Kottak’s definition of an ethnographer to my own research methods, I “move from setting to setting, place to place, and subject to subject to discover the totality and interconnectedness of social life” (Kottak 1996:5).

Taking this approach has entailed gathering a great deal of data through empirical, qualitative research methods in which I have employed a number of ethnographic methodologies to examine the involvement and motivations of those individuals who participate in the ġhana community. I have focused my research specifically on the kitarristi, but I have also taken care to integrate narratives provided by ġhannejja, dilettanti, oganajżers, luthiers, general audience members and those ‘outside’ of the tradition among the general Maltese population and the Maltese and Maltese-Australian academic communities. Following Kottak’s list of suggested ethnographic field techniques (ibid.:6-15), I have collected oral histories, engaged in
countless conversations and conducted over fifty semi-structured interviews that followed a baseline of questions which I asked of all my interviewees. I have worked with “well-informed informants” (ibid. :9) within the tradition as well as those with less knowledge (“exceptional” and “ordinary” musicians in Bruno Nettl’s parlance (Nettl 2005:172-173)), carried out participant-observation and applied emic strategies to interpret particular aspects of the tradition (for example, playing the guitar to determine how a *prim kitarrist* conceives positional relationships on the guitar’s fretboard and to understand which melodic motifs may be stitched together in an improvisation) as well as etic ones (such as generating a taxonomy for melodic motifs that helps to describe and examine them).

During my periods of fieldwork – a total of nineteen weeks in Malta and eleven weeks in Australia (Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra) – I found that my Maltese heritage (my father emigrated from Malta to England in 1970) and status as a student legitimated my interest in the tradition to those I engaged with. On several occasions individuals expressed delight that a second-generation Maltese was interested in his heritage and suggested that, as a student, I was in a position to document their activities for future generations. However, whilst this identity afforded me enough ‘insider’ status to ask certain questions and receive frank answers from some *daqqaqa*, other interviewees were reluctant to sully the reputation of *ghanà* by recounting past rivalries and jealousies to an outsider. Building relationships and confidences became a crucial part of my fieldwork methodology. Engaging in *ghanà* as a participant-observer *kitarrist* was the most advantageous method by which I built my reputation. Performing permitted me to demonstrate to the community that I was not just a spectator, whilst it simultaneously provided me with opportunities to recognise and interpret subtleties of the tradition that I might not have otherwise noticed. In this sense, the guitar became a key that unlocked access both to the tradition and to its community. For example, during
fieldwork in Melbourne it was not until after I was offered the opportunity to accompany in an ghana session that daqqaqa started to talk to me more freely and the audience began to approach me (rather than the other way around). As a participant-observer I have also been able to ‘ask’ technical questions of other daqqaqa via the practical medium of the guitar itself, allowing me to perceive knowledge that may only be explicable in the act of performance.

In private meetings with daqqaqa I often used recordings of ghana performances as stimuli to elicit memories and gather information about people, places and musical technicalities in a method known as a “feedback interview” (Stone and Stone 1981:215). Kitarristi themselves often colluded in this process, spontaneously digging out their own audio and video recordings to illustrate points to me. A number of ethnomusicologists have used recordings and other mediating devices (such as photographs or musical instruments) in this way during their own interviews with equally positive results (Berliner 1978; Dempsey 2010; Landau 2010; 2012; Monson 1996; Stone and Stone 1981; Sugarman 1997). One successful project which I undertook in 2011 that contributed to my subsequent use of this interview technique involved copying and documenting a collection of privately made ghana DVDs from a kitarrist in Malta. Filmed between 1985 and 2010 at a variety of public and private events in Malta and Australia, these recordings not only provided me with invaluable insights into musical subgenres, occasions and performances by a considerable number of daqqaqa, but the documentation process that was undertaken alongside the collection’s owner elicited equally valuable contextual conversations directed by the recordings themselves. The amount of information I learned about the ghana

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7 Sociologists call this practice “stimulated recall” when referring specifically to using recordings of the interviewees themselves in such encounters (see Hodgson 2008).

8 This collection is now available at the British Library under collection code C1479. See Pace 2011 for details.
community through this process encouraged me to utilise recordings in similar ways where possible when talking with other informants. Daqqqaqa have since supplied me with hundreds of audio and video recordings dating from the early 1930s to the present day. These recordings are considered by the ġhana community as significant artefacts that document and sustain their tradition in a number of ways. Not only are they treasured physical documents of an ephemeral tradition that can be played back at will or used by kitarristi as learning tools, recordings also circulate as socio-economic objects that may be bought, traded and gifted, thus affording their owners political power and status within the ġhana community. Audio-visual recordings such as these that play a central role in a community’s musical behaviour are, according to Ronda Sewald, “capable of providing us with information about past events and current forms of human behaviour that is difficult to obtain through other means” (Sewald 2005:8). This information is encoded not only in the media itself, but, as I found, also in the relationships that a viewer negotiates with the content of these recordings and with those who circulate them. As a reflection of the importance with which they are held among daqqqaqa, recordings feature prominently in my research methodologies and analyses.

**Mediterranean and island music studies**

Aspects of the ‘traditional’ themes that are typically found in anthropological studies of Mediterranean cultures – gender, masculinity, honour and shame, hospitality, patronage, kinship – inevitably underpin some of the transactions that manifest within the ġhana community (see for example Fsadni 1993; Herndon 1971; McLeod and Herndon 1975; Sant Cassia 2000). In this thesis, however, I aim to move beyond these conventional Mediterraneanist modes of thought to focus instead on presenting analyses and developing theories that provide original contributions to ġhana scholarship and to
transmission studies more generally. As my own research progressed it became clear that applying Mediterraneanist tropes to observed behaviours and situations often obscured or drew attention away from some of the more salient features of ghana and prejjem, thereby precipitating a distorted view of the tradition and its participants’ behaviours. As ghana (and prejjem in particular) has received little scholarly attention outside of Malta, I feel it is more appropriate to develop fresh ideas and approaches than retread ground that has come under fire from critics over its objectifying theories of geographic and cultural unity within the Mediterranean region (Boissevain 1979; Davis 1977; Herzfeld 1987; Horden and Purcell 2000:486-487; Pina-Cabral 1989). For the same reasons, I have refrained from comparing ghana and prejjem to similar socio-musical practices found elsewhere in the Mediterranean, except in those instances where doing so has elucidated specific issues (as with fado and flamenco in chapter two).

Literature on island musical communities provides a more profitable contextual perspective for my thesis than does a regional, Mediterraneanist focus (see Baldacchino 2011; Dawe 2004a; Manuel 1995). In a query that resonates throughout my thesis, Kevin Dawe considers how islands are symbolically reconstructed in sound, asking “What is the effect of island life … upon the musical imagination of a community?” and “What role does the musical imagination play in the construction and interpretation of islander life, and in the expression of islander sentiments and sensibilities?” (Dawe 2004b:1). The island as a symbolic and geographic space penetrates deep into the psyche of island inhabitants and often continues to be negotiated by those islanders living “off-island” in diasporas (ibid.:8). Malta is an island whose geography, as Ronald

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\[\text{As a brief example, the poetic duelling of ghana spiru pront is a musical form found across the Mediterranean: the} \text{ chjam'e rispondi in Corsica, gara poetic} \text{a and mutetu longu in Sardinia, z} \text{ajal in Lebanon, contrasto in Tuscany and the tsiiattista in Cyprus. However, this form is not restricted to the Mediterranean, but is also found further afield as the desgarrada in Portugal, the payada in Latin America, or even freestyle rap battles in North America (see Pagliai 2009).}\]
Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino observe, is reflected in a culture that is characterised by small-scale, insular, intimate, face-to-face transactions (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994). *Ghana*, whether it is performed in Malta or its diaspora, expresses these sentiments in its musical form, its social behaviours and its presentation. However, the notion of islands as geographically and culturally isolated spaces has long been dismissed (see Eriksen 1993:135; also Curet and Hauser 2011; Curtis 2011) – as Dawe suggests, an island’s geographic and cultural boundaries are “continuously breached, eroded and even washed away” (Dawe 2004b:8) as it is exposed to external influences and internal change. An island can rather more usefully be conceived as a socially constructed “cultural island”: a reflexive communal entity that is determined by its inhabitants negotiating *relative* boundaries of insularity, isolation and ethnicity (Eriksen 1993). This model reveals how such boundaries are, in fact, fluid and permeable. As I demonstrate in this thesis, a number of foreign elements have been successfully incorporated into *ghana* over the past century or more. What I investigate in each of these instances is how individuals within the *ghana* community have assimilated these components into their tradition, yet maintained the illusion of insularity and local innovation. How cultural boundaries are renegotiated and maintained when alien ideas are encountered and appropriated by the *ghana* community is a major theme that runs through this thesis.

**Research questions and thesis structure**

As the “*ghana* community” is a central focus of this thesis, an initial working definition of this socio-musical unit needs to be presented. Mark Slobin and Jeff Titon’s ‘music-culture’ model provides a good starting point, portraying a community’s “total involvement with music” – their perception of sounds, their social interactions, musical repertories and representative objects (Slobin and Titon 1992:1-14). Synthesising Alan
Merriam’s tripartite model of music, Slobin and Titon recognise the centrality of human agency in a community’s socio-musical transactions: “A music-culture ultimately rests in the people themselves – their ideas, actions, and the sounds they produce” (ibid.:6).

A complementary, nuanced variation of this is Kevin Dawe and Andy Bennett’s “guitar culture” concept, encompassing “the guitar makers, guitar players and audiences who imbue guitar music and the instrument itself with a range of values and meanings through which it assumes its place as a cultural icon” (Dawe and Bennett 2001:1; see also Dawe 2013). In this model the focus of a music-culture is on a specific object, the guitar, as a symbolic and physical artefact through which identities are performed and negotiated. The approach that I develop in this thesis to examine the ghana community draws from these two models, where I, too, place an emphasis on examining the totality of interactions between all those who participate in musical performance – for, as Veit Erlmann notes, meaning does not ultimately reside in music, “but is essentially produced in the ever-shifting interaction between actors, interpreters, and performers” (Erlmann 1996:102).

The “ever-shifting interactions” of this quote is key to my thesis: I do not study the components of ghana’s guitar culture in stasis, objectified in time, but instead I examine its ‘objects’ – ghana’s physical, conceptual and musical elements – in motion, following their trajectories through the ghana community. In doing so, I reveal the underlying processes of transmission and transformation that serve to sustain this community. It is the conviviality (or otherwise) of these exchanges and the ambivalent conflicts over the nature of transformation which they produce that continue to draw devotees to ghana. By examining what is transmitted and how I am able to build a picture of why these activities are perpetuated – specifically, how ghana communities are constructed and sustained through the interlocking collective practices of their members. In this thesis I examine how socio-musical knowledge is stored, transmitted
between and transformed by individuals within the ghana community, exploring the ways in which members of this community participate in musical activities, negotiate face-to-face relationships with one another and how they maintain relationships with members of diasporic ghana communities. I also appraise how ghana’s material culture (namely guitars and recordings) has contributed to sustaining this community and its activities.

Transmission, the main theme of this thesis, is the process by which socio-musical ‘objects’ are transferred from one individual or location to another, during which a transformation, however subtle, inevitably occurs to these objects. It is useful to consider the constituent elements of ghana as material objects which can be ‘handled’ in different ways in order to properly grasp the multiplicity of modes by which transmissions take place and how human interactions may alter the form of these objects. As Lynn Meskell saliently points out, “[s]tudies of materiality cannot simply focus upon the characteristics of objects but must engage in the dialectic of people and things” (Meskell 2008:242) – what Arjun Appadurai describes as objects being “enlivened” by human agency (Appadurai 1986:5). In each of my chapters I draw particular attention to those individuals who have acted as catalysts for the evolution of ghana’s socio-musical objects. A number of insightful ethnomusicological studies have also placed a similar prominent focus on the human interactions that enable socio-musical transmissions to occur: these include Paul Berliner’s work on learning the mbira (Berliner 1978) and his investigation of jazz improvisation (Berliner 1994), Timothy Rice’s ethnographic experience of learning the Bulgarian gaida (Rice 1994), Benjamin Brinner’s study of acquiring musical competency in Javanese gamelan (Brinner 1995) and Ingrid Monson’s analysis of “interactiveness” among jazz musicians (Monson 1996).
Bonnie Wade suggests that processes of musical transmission take three forms: oral, aural and written (Wade 2004:16-26). As ghana does not entail an appreciable written component (except for those fatti and poeżiji that are written down by ghannejja), I focus my attention in this thesis on oral and aural forms. For Wade,

Oral transmission takes the perspective of the teacher and implies interaction between teacher and learner. Aural transmission takes the perspective of the learner, who hears the music through some aural source. (ibid.:17)

This depiction draws attention to bodies of knowledge and to intent: what forms do repositories of knowledge take, and in which direction does the intent to transmit or receive this material proceed. Although Wade contextualises this concept in terms of learning the techniques and practices required to perform music, it can also be applied to other ‘objects’ that undergo transmission: how one learns to behave in these communities, how one engages with the symbolism of the community, under what conditions stylistic norms are passed on and given opportunities to evolve, how recordings circulate and how notions of community are transmitted through performance. Determining how knowledge transfers are initiated and the directions in which they flow are key issues that I examine in this thesis.

In her book *Passing it on*, Marie McCarthy explores the transmission of Irish music by examining the kind of processes that I seek to comprehend in the ghana community: “how music is passed on, what is passed on, to whom, and with what purpose” (McCarthy 1999:3). She identifies four themes that unify her transmission study:
Music as culture (a foundation and motivation for transmission), music as canon (a content and set of values that is transmitted), music as community (a context of transmission), and music as communication (a system of methods, media, and technologies used in transmission). (ibid.:9, italics in original)

McCarthy contextualises these themes in summary as follows:

Musical culture is created within community; efforts by communities to pass on their traditions create canons of practice, of repertoire, and of pedagogy; the transmission of music is facilitated by a broad range of communication media and technologies; such technologies can themselves be canonic. (ibid.)

I have striven to apply this theoretical framework to my own thesis. Like McCarthy, I do not separate these themes from one another as they are too interdependent to be untangled intelligibly. Nevertheless, each of my chapters adopt one of these themes as its primary underlying framework and each takes a different “point of entry” (Nettl 2005:238) into the tradition in order to examine transmission from a range of perspectives: chapter one focuses on the guitar as a physical object, chapter two on musical style, chapter three on learning processes and chapter four on sustaining communal relationships.

Chapter one takes “music as communication” as its focus, examining the guitar as a physical object that embodies and transmits biographies, identities and notions of community heritage. I consider the role of the local luthier in creating guitars fit for purpose and the layers of symbolism that the luthiers, the players and their audiences embed into and interpret from each instrument that situates it within a local historical context. I also examine the anthropomorphic dimension that some guitars acquire which
affect their circulation. Chapter two considers “music as canon”, discerning the musical styles of significant *kitarristi* and examining their impact on the instigation and transmission of *prejjem’s* musical style norms. In this chapter transmission is closely linked with transformative processes. Chapter three focuses attention on “music as community”, observing how an individual’s position within the *ghana* community can either facilitate or restrict his access to musical knowledge. This chapter investigates the methods by which a student *kitarrist* acquires relevant socio-musical knowledge through oral and aural processes, determining how he develops musical ability and taste by engaging with members of the *ghana* community in person and via the medium of audio-visual recordings. Chapter four approaches transmission from the perspective of “music as culture”, examining the relationships that are manifested between members of Maltese and diasporic Maltese-Australian *ghana* communities within the context of performance. In these performance spaces conceptions of Malteseness are formed and negotiated through *ghana* in microcosmic performances of Maltese culture and identity.
CHAPTER ONE

Transmitting symbols: mediating histories and biographies through the Maltese guitar
In this chapter I examine those aspects of the ġhana tradition that are transmitted through the guitar as a physical object: I explore the implications of the Maltese guitar’s design aesthetic, the motivations of luthiers in building them, and the identities that they, kitarristi and the wider ġhana community embed into these instruments. As a container and a transmitter of meanings and identities, the guitar is a significant symbolic object for the ġhana communities of Malta and Australia that embodies and reflects their attitudes toward insularity and sociability. Considering the guitar as just such an iconic object, Kevin Dawe and Andy Bennett developed the concept of a “guitar culture” to refer to the collective of “guitar makers, guitar players and audiences who imbue guitar music and the instrument itself with a range of values and meanings through which it assumes its place as a cultural icon” (Dawe and Bennett 2001:1). Dawe portrays the guitar as entangled in a “web of culture that brings the instrument to life”, determining such instruments as empowered, not only by their sound but also by the written word, verbalizations, visual imagery, gestures and movements imbued with values and ideals that are created and maintained within specific social, cultural, political and economic settings. (Dawe and Dawe 2001:64)

Thus, following Eliot Bates, instruments can be seen to possess a “social life” that is constructed for them by those who use them and imbue them with meaning:

Much of the power, mystique, and allure of musical instruments ... is inextricable from the myriad situations where instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships – between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects. Even the same instrument, in
different sociohistorical contexts, may be implicated in categorically different kinds of relations. (Bates 2012:364)

This chapter examines the ghana guitar culture in these terms, considering the various types of relationship that suspend the guitar in a symbolic web of meaning that determines its modes of engagement and reception. I first overview the history of the guitar in Malta before I examine the construction of local models and explore the motivations of Maltese and Maltese-Australian luthiers who make guitars specifically for ghana today. I then consider the significance of Maltese guitars as objects of culture transmission, investigating the layers of symbolism that are embedded (and embodied) in the instrument itself.

A historical background

The first mention of a plucked lute instrument in use amongst the general Maltese population is found in 1467, where we find the instrument noted as a “lichudu”. Further depictions of a “lichutum”, “ghud”, “viola” and “kalaxxun” are found in various Maltese documents through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see Borg Cardona 2014:131-135; Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:1-6). Toward the end of the seventeenth century the lute in Malta appears to have lost favour to the guitar (referred to at the time by the Italian term, chittara (Anna Borg Cardona personal communication 2015)). A contemporary report indicates that one professional luthier in Valletta was at the time producing ten times as many guitars as lutes (Borg Cardona 2014:133). These instruments are likely to have been baroque guitars of Italian design which were popular among the wealthy and in the courts of the period.10 The earliest reference to the

10 The single-coursed six-string guitar that we recognise today emerged in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Spain, France and Italy. For more on the history of the classical guitar, the form that lies at the heart of the Maltese guitar, see Martin 1998; Turnbull 2013.
Maltese term for the guitar, *kitarra* (plural *kitarri*), appears in Agius de Soldanis’s unpublished dictionary which dates from the mid-eighteenth century (ibid.:133-136; Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:8-10). However, at the very end of the eighteenth century – in one of its first comprehensive descriptions – *ghana* is not reported as being accompanied by guitars, but by bowed lyres and violins (de Guignard 1791 in Borg Cardona 2014:151; see also Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:11). In fact, a number of long-term visitors to Malta in the early nineteenth century do not mention a guitar among the musical instruments used by the Maltese at all. George Percy Badger’s account of Malta, first published in 1838, notes the existence of “several different shaped lyres with from two to four strings” in use amongst Maltese musicians, but he does not mention a guitar (Badger 1858:108-109). A report of music in Malta between 1834 and 1848 by the Lebanese Protestant missionary Fāris al-Shidyāq is particularly notable in this respect, as he found it a “strange fact” that no lute instrument was in use amongst the population (in Cachia 1973:46).

However, from the 1850s locally-produced publications begin to suggest that the guitar is being used to accompany *ghana*. Among the earliest, *Għal chitarra, ossia collezione di nuove poesie maltesi sul gusto delle popolari* ("For the guitar, a collection of new poems in the Maltese popular style"), edited by G. A. Vassallo and published in 1851, describes the guitar being used by Maltese musicians to play Maltese pieces alongside continental waltzes, quadrilles and polkas (in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:14). Another chapbook of verses from the same period, *il Għannej Malti – għal fuk il chittara* ("The Maltese folk singer – to be sung to guitar accompaniment"), features a stylised guitar on the cover (see Borg Cardona 2014:153). A firm link between the guitar and *ghana* is found on the cover of an 1878 publication, *il Għannej* ("The folksinger"), as seen in figure 4. Between 1873 and 1894 Saverio Meli issued a series of chapbooks of humorous *ghanja* in Maltese, some of which mention the guitar.
in their titles (in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:15). However, according to Joseph Buttigieg, in 1851 – the same year as Vassallo’s publication – eighty percent of the Maltese adult population could not read or write Maltese, let alone the Italian in which some of these booklets were printed (Buttigieg 1991:32 in Cassola 2001:31; see also Price 1954:102). These chapbooks produced in the second half of the nineteenth century were not necessarily targeted toward folk musicians and their social strata, but rather to intellectuals and the higher classes. When we examine some of the visual depictions of the guitar from this period we find it is often contextualised within romanticised agricultural scenes featuring barefoot peasant musicians. Examples include the il Għannej publication header mentioned above (figure 4), a 1930s postcard by Alfred Gerada of the Mnarja festival12 (figure 5) and Edward Caruana Dingli’s 1927 painting The guitar player (figure 6). Għana has, in fact, always been as much an urban phenomenon as a rural one. Evidence suggests that Valletta, the capital city of Malta, was itself a prominent locale for għana well into the 1960s and 1970s.

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11 I am indebted to William Zammit for showing me six additional Maltese chapbooks of għanjiet, all dating from a few years around 1906, whose titles explicitly refer to the guitar or to being sung with guitar accompaniment. It is likely many more were published in this period, but there has not yet been a comprehensive survey of publications (see Zammit 2007a; 2007b).

12 Mnarja is the national Maltese festival of SS Peter and Paul held annually in June in Buskett gardens, a wooded area near Rabat. In 1953 it was decided by a group of folklorists, in collaboration with the Agrarian Society, that an official competition for għana and other musical traditions would be held during this festa. Despite its popularity – and its heralding the modern era of għana (Fsadni 1992) – this addition to Mnarja was something of a romanticised spectacle. According to a 1954 call for applicants, for instance, “Additional points will be awarded by the judges to those competitors dressed in the traditional Maltese costume ‘ta’ Zepp” (Times of Malta 1954).
Fig. 4. ‘il Ghannej’ title page header, 1878 (in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:125).

Fig. 5. Pen and ink drawing of guitar and melodeon player in front of Verdala Palace, Buskett, Alfred Gerada, c.1930s (in Borg Cardona 2014:154).
Fig. 6. ‘The Guitar Player’. Painting by Edward Caruana Dingli, 1927.
It is not surprising to note a correlation between the demise of indigenous instruments upon the arrival of a British administration in 1800 (Malta formally became a British colony in 1814) and the rise in status of modern diatonic instruments, such as the guitar, among local musicians. In the mid-nineteenth century Britain relocated its Mediterranean naval fleet to Malta, thereby improving the Maltese economy (albeit in a direction that relied heavily on international events) and changing the way of life for much of the island’s population (Frendo 2004:102-103; Hayes 2010:37-38). In 1791 F. E. de Guignard notes a great variety of musical instruments to be in use by the Maltese (see Borg Cardona 2002:19), yet by 1838 Badger suggests that many of these older instruments had fallen into disuse and had been replaced largely by “companies of blind fiddlers” – although the żaqq bagpipe, tanbur drum, rabbaba friction drum and several forms of lyre did remain (Badger 1858:108; for more see Borg Cardona 2014). By the mid-nineteenth century, community brass and wind bands following the British regimental tradition begin to gain great popularity in Maltese and Gozitan villages – many of which still thrive today (Borg Cardona 2014:14). A number of musical instrument shops opened in Valletta around this time to cater for these bands and began to import other popular instruments to the islands (ibid.).¹³

Modern European diatonic instruments were becoming widespread in Malta by the turn of the twentieth century: melodeons, concertinas, accordions and mandolins were particularly popular, the latter two being commonly found accompanying ġhana alongside the guitar in both solo and ensemble contexts (Stumme 1904 in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:19-20; also Borg Cardona 2014:154). By the 1930s the guitar and ġhana had become inseparably linked, attested to by the pairing of kitarristi and ġhannejja in a brief but significant flurry of commercial recordings released in 1931.

¹³ These shops continued to thrive into the twentieth century. An image of the window of Carabott’s Musical Emporium appears in the 1931 Dischi Maltin Odeon catalogue, revealing a wide variety of violins, banjos, ukeleles, balalaikas, bouzoukis and wind instruments for sale (Alamango 2010:26).
and 1932 by record companies such as HMV, Odeon, Polyphon, Zonophone and Pathé (see Alamango 2011). The ghana recordings from this period feature well-integrated and highly musical lead guitar melodies and accompaniment patterns that are still found in common use today (as I will examine in chapter two). Despite a handful of these ghana recordings incorporating larger ensembles of accordions, tambourines and whistles alongside guitars, to sing ghana without guitar accompaniment (a common activity noted in the early 1900s by Stumme (1904)), or with instruments other than the guitar, appears to be unusual by the early 1930s. This period marks the historical ‘starting point’ of my thesis.

1.1 Maltese guitar construction

Maltese kitarristi today very rarely use a guitar produced by a large-scale manufacturer, instead preferring those made by a handful of Maltese luthiers in the general style of the Spanish and Italian models that were once prevalent in Malta. This is largely the case in Australia, too, where Maltese-made guitars are often prized (although they are not always commonly used). If kitarristi use foreign guitars they tend to be Spanish style classical or flamenco models modified with steel strings. Figure 7 details the approximate measurements for all of the models that are made locally in Malta today, from largest to smallest, as categorised by the luthier Carmelo Grech. Most luthiers and kitarristi generally only differentiate between two models: the kitarra and the terżin (and additionally the pastardin on the rare occasions it is used), respectively equivalent to a ‘normal’ sized guitar typically used by akkumpanjisti and a slightly smaller one that is favoured by prim kitarristi (Joe Bonello personal communication 2010; Borg Cardona 2014:155; Herndon 1971:98; Zahra 2006:22).
The *kitarra* is the largest model used by *kitarristi* and is closest in scale to the Spanish guitar. The *kitarra* and the slightly smaller *kitarrina* are most suited as *akkumpanjament* guitars as they produce a deeper resonance than the other models due to their large internal volume. The *terżin*'s shallow depth and short scale neck accentuate its mid-range tones, generating a bright, penetrating timbre that is favoured by *prim kitarristi* who desire a tone that can cut through the strumming of the *akkumpanjament*. The *terżin*'s short scale length also allows its strings to be easily tuned a tone above concert pitch, as is common for the *prim kitarra*.\textsuperscript{14} The high string tension combined with a small body means the *terżin* (and those even smaller models which are favoured by some *prim kitarristi*) produces a characteristically bright, sharp tone with little sustain. The *baghal pastardin* – reminiscent of a parlour guitar in its size and shape – has a descriptive epithet that implies a “mule”, a cross between a *terżin* and the very small *pastardin*. Borg Cardona finds the *pastardin* popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, noting a number of *ghanja* stanzas from the

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Scale length (inches) & Upper bout (inches) & Lower bout (inches) & Waist (inches) & Body depth (inches) \\
\hline
*Kitarra* & 26 & 13.5 & 15 & 10 & 4 \\
*Kitarrina* & 25 & 10.25 & 13.5 & 8.75 & 3.25 \\
*Terżin* & 23.5 & 11 & 14 & 8.5 & 2.75 \\
*Baghal pastardin* & 23 & 9 & 12 & 6.5 & 3 \\
*Pastardin* & 21 & 8 & 10.5 & 7.5 & 2.5 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Fig. 7. Key measurements for Maltese guitar models in use today.

\textsuperscript{14} There are similarities between the Maltese *terżin* and the small, shallow bodied European terz guitar of the early nineteenth century. ‘Terz’ literally means “third”, indicating how it is to be tuned a minor third above concert pitch (Buckland 2011). Therefore, in a typical art music duet between a terz and classical guitar, if the terz is playing in C major, the second guitar, tuned to concert pitch, is playing in A major. In *ghanja* we find a similar tuning correlation of a minor third between the accompanying Doh and La guitars (this tuning system is detailed in chapter two). Further analysis of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, but research into the terz guitar may reveal something of the origin of the complex tuning system that is found in Maltese guitar ensembles.
period that mention its use as a lead instrument within an ensemble of guitars (Borg Cardona 2014:155). The luthier and *prim kitarrist* Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* recalls a *pastardin* used in *ghana* ensembles during his youth (1920s-1930s), describing it as a very small, short-scale, six-string guitar with a higher register (Brincat 1959; Casha interview 2014a). However, Cassar Pullicino is less certain of its guitar heritage, describing it instead as “a stringed musical instrument somewhat similar to a mandoline and a banjo” (Koessler-Ilg and Cassar Pullicino 1962:14). Today the *pastardin* is constructed and tuned as per any other *ghana* guitar. The two *pastardin* variants noted in my table are, however, uncommon instruments that are favoured by only three or four *prim kitarristi* (such as John Saliba ta’ Birżebbuġa, who is also proficient on the mandolin).

A unifying constructional aesthetic is applied across these models. Woods, colours, designs and body shapes may differ according to the taste of the luthier or the *kitarrist*, but all guitars for *ghana* should ideally be physically light, loud and tonally bright. All guitars are strung with thin steel strings, typically gauge 9 or 10 (0.009 or 0.010 of an inch thickness for the first string). Other common features are the neck joining the body at the twelfth fret – as is common on classical and flamenco guitars and on Western folk and parlour guitars – and a very wide nut width of between 1 3/4 inches and 2 1/4 inches (most six-string acoustic guitars have a nut width of 1 11/16 inches). Some luthiers add a fret just in front of the nut, known as a zero fret. Although not ubiquitous, this device appears on a much larger proportion of Maltese guitars than on commercial European acoustic guitars. It is, however, fairly common on turn-of-the-

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15 It is possible that the Maltese *pastardin* is derived from the *chitarra battente* of southern Italy (see Tucci and Ricci 1985 for a study of this instrument).

16 Many Maltese, especially *daqqaqa*, have a nickname (*lagam*) suffixed to their name that serves to uniquely identify them. In this case, Indri Brincat is often called “Indri il-Pupa”, or sometimes just “Pupa”. For more on Maltese nicknames see Boissevain 2006:53-55; Cassar Pullicino 1992:123-140; Herndon 1971:239-243. Throughout this thesis I apply nicknames (when they exist) to clarify the identity of an individual.
century Italian guitars. Another feature found on many of these Italian models that has been transferred to Maltese guitars is the use of a fretboard dot marker at the tenth fret, rather than at the usual ninth fret. Maltese guitars tend to be fairly low-tech and are often made from salvaged materials; luthiers often use relatively low quality woods sourced from fruit boxes, firewood or discarded furniture (some may re-use soundboards or necks from old, imported guitars), nuts and saddles are often fashioned from discarded animal bones, and tuning pegs and rails are rescued from irreparable guitars (see also Borg Cardona 2014:4). The action (the string height above the fretboard) may be too high or too low, fret wire can overhang, necks are often very thick with little or no tapering and buzzes and dead spots may appear across the fretboard. The heat and humidity in Malta also takes its toll on the wood, strings and metal components of a guitar – a kitarrist will slacken the tension of his guitar’s strings after use, reducing the strain on the soundboard to minimise the risk of it warping.

The promotional photographs of kitarristi that accompany their 1931-1932 commercial ġhana recordings reveal a wealth of valuable information about guitar construction and design traits during this period, whilst the recordings themselves confirm that the timbral qualities of these guitars match the ideal that is striven for today. Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp’s guitar is profusely decorated with a flower pattern scratchplate and matching edge purfling (figure 8 right, and figure 9). Emmanuele Ċilia ta’ Żabbeti’s guitar is quite plain in comparison, constructed of darker woods with a Spanish rosette around the soundhole (figure 8 left, and figure 10). Emmanuele Mercieca is-Semenza has a chequered edge binding on two of his guitars, one of which exhibits an extravagant bridge and a scalloped fretboard end (figure 11). Ġużeppi Prato’s guitar has a tailpiece and an ornate spidered structure in the soundhole (figure 12). There are tenth-fret markers and zero frets on those guitars used by Cardona and Prato; however, a ninth-fret marker and no zero-fret are seen on one of Mercieca’s
guitars, and no fretboard markers or zero-fret are visible on Ċilia’s. These few guitars used by the top daqqaqqa of the period display a wide variety of stylistic designs that were evidently available in Malta at the time.

Fig. 8. Emmanuele Ċilia ta’ Żabbett (left) and Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp (right), c.1931 (Alamango 2010, accompanying CD-ROM).
Fig. 9. Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp, c.1931 (Alamango 2010, accompanying CD-ROM).
Fig. 10. Emmanuele Ĉilia ta’ Żabbett, c.1931 (Alamango 2010, postcard insert).
Fig. 11. Emmanuele Mercieca is-Semenza, c.1931 (Alamango 2010, postcard insert).

Fig. 12. Ġużeppe Prato (left), c.1931 (Alamango 2010, postcard insert).
However, these are unlikely to be Maltese-made instruments. An inspection of two guitars dating from the 1920s-1930s that were owned by Cardona (neither of which bear makers’ marks) reveals that both are good quality southern Italian or Sicilian instruments. Many Italian guitars were imported to Malta at this time through Carabott’s Musical Emporium in Valletta, one of the city’s most popular musical instrument and record shops. I have found a number of vintage guitars in Malta that date from this period by popular Sicilian (particularly Catanian) manufacturers such as Giuseppe Indelicato and Alfredo Albertini that feature the kind of colourful, ornate, cut plastic designs and edge purfling that appear on the soundboard of the guitar that we see Cardona pictured with in figures 8 and 9, and on Mercieca’s guitar in figure 11. Much of the flower and butterfly iconography commonly found on these guitars continues to be seen on Maltese guitars today (as will be examined later in this chapter). It must, however, be noted that the handful of daqqqaqa who were recorded in 1931 and 1932 were minor celebrities who could afford better quality guitars than the majority of their contemporaries. Nevertheless, as these kitarristi were highly visible in their heyday, their choice of instrument would no doubt have been influential. As a contrast, one amateur photograph (figure 13) of two unidentified kitarristi dating from the early twentieth century exhibits plain guitars of Spanish style rather than the smaller, decorative, Italian parlour models favoured by most of the 1930s recording artists. These are the type of guitars which would have been used by the vast majority of kitarristi at the time. After the Second World War, the physical and economic reconstruction of Malta and its parallel in Italy had a devastating effect on the import of luxury items such as musical instruments. Those guitars I have found in Malta made in

17 It is also likely that instruments such as these ended up in Malta via the multitude of visiting sailors, tradesmen and professional musicians who passed through the island. Valletta’s bars and clubs played host to a lively popular music scene in the early twentieth century, regularly showcasing Maltese jazz and popular musicians alongside theatre troupes, popular artists and light operatic and jazz ensembles from all over Europe and the Mediterranean (see Alamango 2010:34-35; Cini 2013; Schofield and Morrissey 2013:79-88).
post-war Italy (and elsewhere) are of an inferior quality to those made pre-war. This immediate post-war period marks a new era of guitar-building in Malta, led principally by Indri Brincat *il-Pupa*.¹⁸

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¹⁸ It is also worth highlighting the ill-feeling felt by the Maltese toward Italy after the Second World War, which was no doubt another contributing factor for the emergence of local Maltese luthiers.
1.2 Maltese luthiers

Most guitars used for ġhana today (and likely in the past) have been made, adapted or repaired by professional or semi-professional local woodworkers and craftsmen who have turned their hand to guitar making. Some are guitarists themselves; others cannot play a note. These luthiers build instruments for their own pleasure rather than as a commercial enterprise (see also Borg Cardona 2014:149). Indeed, there has been no real economy for dedicated luthiers to challenge the dominance of Indri Brincat il-Pupa, who between the late 1940s and 2000s was almost singlehandedly able to fulfil the demands of local and diasporic kitarristi. During this period there have been three prominent luthiers in Malta and two in Australia, alongside a handful of enthusiasts.

Indri Brincat il-Pupa

Indri Brincat il-Pupa (1920–2010) is ġhana’s most celebrated prim kitarrist and luthier. His enduring legacy is formed by his unique omnipresent position as a master prim kitarrist, a creative musical innovator and a prolific luthier (most kitarristi own at least one guitar made by him). Brincat was from a musical family: his father and uncle, both kitarristi, showed Brincat the rudiments of playing the guitar when he was aged around six years old, after which he began following them to ġhana bars (Brincat 2009; Casha interview 2014a; Herndon 1971:203; Spagnol interview 2012). Brincat’s mother, Marie, was an ġhana fil-gholi singer whom he would accompany on xalati (village-organised social excursions). Around 1936, aged sixteen years old, he moved from his birthplace of Luqa to Qormi, having already gained a reputation as a kitarrist performing in ġanuti and titoljer cafes (small bars that sold tea and coffee instead of alcohol) (Brincat 1959; Casha interview 2014a). Brincat served in the army during the Second World War and was stationed in Mtarfa, Malta, where it is reported that he would frequently entertain himself and his comrades with a guitar (Spagnol interview
2012). After the war, around 1947, he began to make guitars in his home workshop in Qormi (Brincat 1959; Cassar Pullicino 1961:69) whilst simultaneously working as a government electrician. Brincat is unusual among Maltese luthiers in that he had no affiliation with woodworking beyond that of a hobbyist. According to Joseph Camilleri, a young luthier apprenticed to Brincat toward the end of the latter’s life, Brincat’s motivation for making guitars stemmed from his love of playing them and from his frustration at their limited availability and high cost after the Second World War (Camilleri 2010).

Brincat first embarked on his craft by repairing guitars for friends, earning a little money in the process (Grech interview 2013b). Soon afterward it is alleged that he traced the outline of a set of three guitars owned by a kitarrist nicknamed il-Bożen (possibly Pawlu Frendo, or perhaps his father, Ġużeppi) which formed the template for the models he began to make (Camilleri 2010). Many of Brincat’s guitars are constructed from parts of older, imported Spanish and Italian models that were available in Malta before the Second World War. Brincat might, for example, pair a good quality soundboard (wiċċ, “face”) from an early twentieth century Spanish guitar with a neck (il-manku, “the handle” (Zahra 2006:24) or maqbad, something you “grip” or “catch” (Grech interview 2013c)) from an Italian parlour guitar, replacing the back and sides of the body with locally sourced wood from tea boxes or scraps of firewood from bakeries near his home (Spagnol interview 2012). Brincat chose woods for their malleability, availability and strength rather than for their tonal qualities (Grech interview 2013b). Camilleri credits constructional strength as the “secret” to Brincat’s guitars, noting his use of strong internal bracing techniques, tight fitting joints and

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19 Also known as a gverta, “blanket”, after a shipbuilding term that describes the deck of a ship (Grech interview 2013c).

20 Brincat repaired or reconstructed so many guitars over the years (and in the process removed original makers’ labels and replaced them with his own) that few ‘original’ imported guitars exist in Malta.
generous amounts of glue (Camilleri 2010). A ‘good guitar’ should be able to sustain misuse in ġhana’s performance venues and withstand Malta’s harsh weather conditions.

Camilleri also draws attention to what he identifies as a “drum philosophy” behind Brincat’s guitars:

He looked at the guitar as a drum. He would often tap the top to sort of test it before it was done, while it was open [during construction]. He would tap on [it] ... to listen to the instrument’s top vibrate to see what the final product would be like. (ibid.)

Camilleri points out that a number of Brincat’s guitars resonate at a pitch of C when the top is tapped, others at A. “Punchiness” and projection are the ideal sonic characteristics of Brincat’s guitars (ibid.), manifesting as a bright, harsh tone that cuts through the ġhannejja’s voices and the ambient noise of bars. When kitarristi perform at the Ġhanafest festival each summer, some ask the sound engineers to equalise their miked guitars to remove all the bass frequencies and increase the treble to imitate (and perhaps exaggerate) the characteristic tonal qualities of their guitars (D’Amato interview 2013). The aesthetic ideal for some kitarristi is seemingly beyond the acoustic capabilities of the instrument. These sonic and constructional conventions for the Maltese guitar are a direct legacy of Brincat’s dominating influence as a musician and luthier. He built guitars to suit his own style of prim playing and to complement his own imposing physiology (Attard interview 2014), making strong guitars with thick, wide necks and a high action that produce a loud, clear and penetrating tone. Brincat’s prolific output and visibility both as a luthier and a kitarrist dictated that his constructional preferences for a guitar would become the standard design preference for other luthiers and kitarristi who followed him.
As with all Maltese-made guitars, Brincat’s carry unique identifying markings that display, to the initiated, that the instrument is one of his models. Most common are a white isosceles triangle on either side of the bridge, between which are often positioned one or more large white dots. Another typical feature on his soundboard is a narrow strip of herringbone edge binding (*intarsjar*), a design which is sometimes continued on the headstock. Brincat was also fond of using a small strip of coloured felt on the headstock just to the side of the nut – a detail also common to southern Italian guitars from the early twentieth century. Another feature that is typical of vintage Italian guitars which is also found on Brincat’s is a fretboard marker at the tenth fret instead of the ninth, a detail that I noted above.\(^\text{21}\) Whilst these latter two design features did not originate with Brincat, his aesthetic preference for them and his influence as a highly visible kitarrist and luthier permitted these nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian decorative traditions to flourish in the Maltese guitar. An example of a guitar by Brincat that features all of these design features is seen being played by him in figure 14.

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\(^\text{21}\) When Salvu Tanti *il-\-Kanadiż* received a guitar made for him by the luthier Crispin Attard that had a dot marker on the ninth fret, he asked Attard to change it to the tenth. Despite Tanti’s claim that he does not need the marker in order to play – particularly so as he is an akkumpanjist and has no need to fret that high – it was not the “proper way” for ghana (Tanti interview 2013a). I have seen numerous non-Maltese made guitars in Malta and Australia with the ninth fret marker blotted out.
The Maltese ‘harp’ guitar

Although the majority of the guitars that Brincat made were terżin and kitarrina models, he also dabbled with a number of unconventional shapes over the decades, including a set of trapezoid guitars and two that resemble a bouzouki. His most successful design innovation, which he has since become synonymous with, is the ‘harp’ guitar. This constructional variation features a large curved arm, the tromba (‘trunk’ or ‘trumpet’; sometimes qrun, “horn”), that protrudes from the bass bout and extends as far as the nut (figure 14). This design, favoured rather more by prim kitarristi than by akkumpanjisti, is most commonly found incorporated into a terżin or a kitarrina (transforming it into a terżin tat-tromba or a kitarrina tat-tromba).22 The hollow tromba increases the volume of the guitar in terms of both internal space and dynamics. Toward the narrowing tip of the tromba is an additional smaller soundhole on the top face. This soundhole makes little difference to the overall tone of the guitar, but some kitarristi suggest that its position near one’s ear allows the kitarrist to hear himself more clearly during a performance (Bonello interview 2013b; Camilleri 2010). A particularly cumbersome variation on this design, and one which is most iconically linked to Brincat as a performer, are those models with two trombi – one on each bout, in mirror image (figure 15). In all other respects these guitars conform to the same constructional norms as their ‘base’ model.

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22 Sometimes the tromba is also found on the largest kitarra model. In 2014 Carmelo Grech made two baghal pastardin tat-tromba models, which are the first in this smaller size that I have encountered.
Fig. 15. Terżin tat-trombi made and owned by Indri Brincat il-Pupa, pictured at Ghanafest, Malta, 2010 (courtesy Andrew Sammut).
Brincat never acknowledged the source of this design, often simply claiming the electric guitar – most likely the Fender Stratocaster – as an influence (Camilleri 2010; Joseph Camilleri personal communication 2013; Grech interview 2013b). The earliest image of Brincat with a *terżin tat-tromba* dates to 1972.\(^\text{23}\) The *tromba* itself bears a strong resemblance to the type of arm found on harp guitars, onto which additional sub-bass strings are usually anchored. However, on Maltese models there are no extra strings. On researching the design, Joseph Camilleri found the very early harp guitars of Chris Knutsen of Washington state, USA to be very similar to Brincat’s design – specifically the 1896 “one-arm harp guitar” seen in figure 16 (Camilleri 2010). However, by 1898 Knutsen was using a different design arm extension to which were anchored three to six sub-bass strings (Miner 2012). It was this form of true harp guitar, with additional bass strings, that gained popularity in Europe and the Americas in the early twentieth century through the work of a number of luthiers. It is interesting to note that Knutsen also produced a “continuous arm” model between 1895 and 1898 (figure 17; see Miner 2006a) which resembles Brincat’s double-armed *trombi* model. In noting these comparisons we must, however, consider the access to instruments that Brincat had when he began to make his *tromba* models. There is no evidence to suggest that he encountered any of Knutsen’s (very rare) guitars in the 1960s or 1970s. It is more feasible that Brincat came into contact with harp guitars from southern Italy, considering the prevalence of Italian and Sicilian music and instruments in Malta, rather than from further abroad.

\(^{23}\) Brincat poses with this guitar among the Viva Malta folk group in a *Times of Malta* feature printed on November 11th 1972 (*Times of Malta* 1972). Camilleri suggests the design was invented between the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Joseph Camilleri personal communication 2013); however, the *tromba* variant was not noted by Marcia Herndon during her 1969-1970 research period, despite her close association with Brincat. I conclude that 1970-1972 is a likely date of origin for this design.
Fig. 16. One-arm harp guitar by Chris Knutsen, c.1896-1897 (Miner 2006b).

Fig. 17. Continuous-arm harp guitar by Chris Knutsen, c.1895-1898 (Miner 2006a).
One of the first luthiers to make ‘true’ harp guitars (with additional sub-bass strings) in Europe was Settimio Gazzo of Genoa in the 1890s. His guitars became inextricably linked with the virtuoso Italian harp guitarist Pasquale Taraffo (Miner 2011a), a very popular musician in Italy (and throughout the world) in the 1920s and 1930s (see figure 18). By the early twentieth century there were many luthiers in Italy and Sicily making harp guitars: Mozzani, Massetti, Gamberini, Maccaferri, Mattei, Candi, Poggi, Catania, Rapisarda, Galimberti, Riva, and Giulietti are particularly notable examples (see Miner 2013; 2014). However, almost all of these harp guitars include sub-bass strings and often feature quite elaborate structural designs (as Taraffo’s in figure 18). In a rare contrast to this, in Catania, Sicily, there is evidence that the luthier Rosario Porto and Figli and Sons designed (although it is unknown if production models were made) a six-string harp guitar between 1898 and 1903 – which can be seen in figure 19 – that bears a striking resemblance to Brincat’s terżin tat-tromba. This guitar features a typical complement of Italian decorative features which were later adopted by Maltese luthiers and kitarristi: a butterfly motif, an alternating coloured edge binding and a ‘moustache’ bridge – this latter adornment being a favoured bridge design of Brincat’s in his early years as a luthier (Attard interview 2014; Camilleri 2010). Around 1903, Porto and Figli also appeared to develop a harp mandolin: a four-coursed bowl-back mandolin with a bass bout arm (figure 20). Intriguingly, Brincat possessed a pencil sketch of a harp mandolin in this very style which he kept in his workshop. Porto and Figli instruments, particularly mandolins, dating from the early twentieth century are occasionally found in Malta today. Ultimately, we do not know where Brincat found inspiration for his tromba models, but certainly it is not a design that is indigenous to Malta.
Fig. 18. Pasquale Taraffo with a Settimio Gazzo harp guitar, c.1900 (Miner 2011a).

Fig. 19. Harp guitar by Rosario Porto and Figli and Sons, c.1898-1903 (Miner 2011b).
Other luthiers and their philosophies

Many Maltese luthiers today (and in the recent past) are retired or semi-retired hobbyists who make guitars in their spare time for the enjoyment of the activity rather than for financial benefit. Considering the amount of time and skill that goes into the manufacture of a guitar, a typical selling price of between €80 and €250 (depending on the model, the complexity of its construction and its decoration) covers material cost and little else. A low price-point suggests resistance to commodification – a process which would paradoxically devalue the instrument if it were made unaffordable to those who would use it (see Kopytoff 1986:82-83). In fact, it is not unusual for a luthier to gift a guitar to a *kitarrist* he admires (see also Bradley 2002:6).

Aside from Brincat, there have been four other prominent luthiers in Malta and its diaspora in the latter part of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Carmelo Grech (b. 1948) of Marsaxlokk is a retired carpenter who works out of a small but well-equipped toolshed in his yard. Crispin Attard (b. 1934) of Żabbar is a retired boat builder whose large garage workshop combines guitar- and boat making tools. Salvu Farrugia (1933–2002) of Melbourne, Australia, was a general handyman, carpenter and
mechanic (among other trades) (Casha 2002). Pinu Baldacchino (1933–2009), another Melbourne-based luthier, was a labourer in the building industry before his retirement.24

Carmelo Grech has made and repaired guitars and mandolins as a hobby since 1973. Learning from books on the subject, he humbly declares that “all you have to do is copy the designs and measurements precisely and it will be correct!” (Carmelo Grech personal communication 2012). The hand tools he favours are several decades old (remnants from his working life as a carpenter) because, as he explained to me, new ones are just not as good. Brincat also preferred old hand tools to anything modern or electrical, stating that one “had to feel the wood when you work with it” (Casha 2010). As Grech is not a guitarist, satisfaction for him is attained in the process of manufacturing the physical object (from the feel and smell of working wood) and in hearing good kitarristi play his instruments – as Borg Cardona found was also the case for Crispin Attard (Borg Cardona 2014:161). Grech is an ġhana dilettant whose interests lie principally in guitars: their appearance, their sound and their players. His motivation as a luthier is to hear his guitars used for ġhana, claiming that it would break his heart to see one of his instruments hung on a wall as a decoration (Carmelo Grech personal communication 2012).

Grech uses a variety of local and imported wood for his guitars, often choosing his materials as much for their colour and beauty as for their quality as tonewoods. Although he would like to use high-grade wood such as spruce, rosewood and mahogany, these are expensive to import to Malta and would drive up the cost of his guitars beyond what kitarristi would be willing to pay. Therefore, he substitutes similar-density wood from more accessible and affordable sources, often using broken-up old furniture or plywood fruit and tea boxes (Grech interview 2013a). Both Grech and Attard favour white deal for their soundboards; ash and pine were typical for Brincat, or

24 See Bradley 2002:6-7 for a colourful introduction to Baldacchino.
spruce if it was available. Ash and pine are unusual choices for acoustic guitars, but were particularly favoured by Brincat for their workability and ready availability.\(^{25}\) Grech is perhaps the most ostentatious luthier in Malta, favouring a high level of decoration – what he calls *fanfru*, referring to a pilot fish (Grech interview 2013b) – both in his use of parquetry and purfling and in his choice of colourful woods and stains. In one model, seen in figure 21, he uses white deal, pine, brown ebony, Honduran mahogany, birch, Brazilian mahogany and iroko. Another model has a back that is completely covered by narrow strips of colourful veneer parquetry (figure 22). Grech often places a crucifix on the headstock and sometimes a small Maltese cross badge toward the tail of the soundboard (or, on occasion, on the headstock).\(^{26}\) On some of his guitars he uses sticker characters to spell out “Carmelo” on the soundboard, behind and parallel with the bridge. Grech chooses not to varnish his guitars, preferring a bare wood finish. He criticises fellow luthier Crispin Attard for his practice of French polishing his guitars due to the deadening effect Grech perceives varnish to have on the vibrations of the wood.

\(^{25}\) It is interesting to note that in Maltese shipbuilding in past centuries, “the most popular timber in use was the white and red deal, pine, oak and larch. Ash, elm and walnut was ordered for special use in the making of rudders of galleys” (Muscat 2004:273). There appears to be a common stock of woods shared by luthiers, boat builders (of which Attard is also one) and carpenters (Grech).

\(^{26}\) By placing a crucifix on his guitars, Grech, a devoutly religious man, feels he is paying homage to God for providing him with the ability to make guitars (Grech interview 2013b).
Fig. 21. Front and rear of a baghal pastardin by Carmelo Grech, c.2012.
Fig. 22. Front and rear of a kitarra tat-tromba by Carmelo Grech, c.2012.
Grech and Brincat’s guitars often feature low quality (often locally-sourced) woods and unrefined nut, tuners (*krikkijiet*, literally “brakes”), frets (*tasti*), bridge and saddle details. Although consistently well-made, Grech’s guitars all require an amount of fine-tuning before they are playable; whilst Brincat’s guitars vary greatly in their constructional quality and playability. Crispin Attard’s guitars, on the other hand, are finished to an excellent standard: there are few issues with the string height, nut or saddle, and frets are flush against the fretboard. Attard favours a striking alternating dark and light wood checker design purfling around the edge of the body and soundhole, set off by a pale top (figure 23). However, when comparing guitars by Grech and Attard, Grech’s have more resonance, tone colours and sustain over Attard’s, although Attard’s have better intonation and are easier to play and tune. Both Sam Farrugia and Pinu Baldacchino’s guitars exhibit a comfortable low action and are very light weight, often being made of plywood. Such a guitar, as Kevin Bradley describes, “whose physical lightness gives life to the music and absorbs none of the sound into itself”, is known as *kitarra ħafifa*; an ideal which confirms *prejjem*’s aesthetic preference for minimal sustain and little in the way of complex overtones (Bradley 2002:6). A rich, balanced sound emanating from a high-quality guitar is not suitable for *ghan*.* The classical Maltese guitarist Tony Pace succinctly summarises this ideal, pointing to the symbolism of desiring such a sound: “Maltese guitars are not made of very fine wood; that’s the sound. You can play the Maltese song with a concert guitar, but it’s not *Maltese*” (Pace interview 2010).
Fig. 23. Kitarrina tat-tromba by Crispin Attard, c.2010.
1.3 The aesthetics and materiality of Maltese guitars

A Maltese guitar, then, has a distinctive appearance and aural signature that differentiates it from other guitars; but how are these elements recognised and interpreted, and what makes them uniquely Maltese? The guitar is an instrument that has been adopted and adapted to satisfy an almost infinite variety of musical requirements. Due to its profuse global diffusion and local re-appropriation, Kevin Dawe describes the guitar as a “glocal” instrument (after Roland Robertson) that exists as “part of the dynamic interplay between global and local forces, which ... keep notions of cultural identity and difference in a constant state of flux” (Dawe 2013:8). Although the guitar is embedded in a host of localised musical practices throughout the world and is often used as a marker of insider-hood for these communities, its global heritage cannot be entirely shed; its foreignness is betrayed by its form, despite the localisms that may be appended to it. With a glocal object such as the guitar, issues of here and there, us and them and local and foreign are encoded into the transformations that have been made to its form and use. As Igor Kopytoff suggests, “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff 1986:67). This redefinition is a continuous, dynamic process that is rendered through time by those who consider the guitar as a functional and symbolic artefact of their community.

In his influential edited volume The social life of things, to which Kopytoff contributed, Arjun Appadurai stresses the importance of following the social history that is attributed to, and embedded within, such objects:

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this
formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. (Appadurai 1986:5, italics in original)

Applying this methodology to my own study, the significance of a Maltese guitar can be revealed by studying its life history within the community (or communities) that uses it. This approach rests largely upon ‘agency’, a theory that “studies the ways in which [objects] stimulate ... emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators” (after Alfred Gell in Hoskins 2006:75). Employing Appadurai’s terms, agency highlights the impact of those “human actors” who “encode things with significance” (Appadurai 1986:5). Ultimately, as Christopher Steiner asserts, objects are “infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed for them through human agency” (Steiner in Hoskins 2006:75, italics in original), suggesting that objects do not themselves intrinsically embody biographies, but rather that they provide a medium through which debates can be provoked and negotiated. A Maltese guitar’s history and biography may well be inscribed in its form, but the knowledge with which to interpret these symbols resides within the ġhana community and its human transactions. The interpretation of a Maltese guitar’s visual and sonic markers is determined by one’s recognition of them; not everyone who views a particular Maltese guitar ‘sees’ its biography in the same way. Conceiving of Maltese guitars as objects with biographies and social lives, as symbolic artefacts into which
individual and communal histories and values are (quite literally) inscribed by
significant “actors”, provides me with a useful methodology with which I can examine
the meanings that are encoded into and interpreted from Maltese guitars. From this I can
extrapolate why a locally produced instrument is preferred over an imported model and
reflect on what this choice reveals to us about the ġhana community more generally.

Most kitarristi insist on using Maltese-made guitars as only they produce the
‘right sound’ for ġhana, even though a Maltese guitar does not sound (or play) all that
differently to a low-quality branded instrument. Kevin Bradley rightly claims that by
choosing these locally-made models over others, Maltese guitarists are making a
powerful symbolic statement:

When a guitarist with the skills and abilities of these musicians prefers to
perform on a guitar that another skilled musician would find unplayable, they are
not only making a statement about sound, but also about the boundaries that
differentiate the music they are playing. (Bradley 2002:7)

These boundaries of differentiation are formed by what the Maltese guitar is not just as
much as by what it is: it is not a high quality instrument, but it does have a particular
look and sound; it is not mass produced, therefore each guitar is unique; it is not
purchased from a shop, instead it is bought and traded among members of the ġhana
community. Such symbolic statements about a Maltese guitar’s sound, form and use
reveal something of the insularity of the ġhana community and of the attitudes of its
members toward music-making, but they also hint at more subtle distinctions that may
be recognised by those who engage more deeply in ġhana’s guitar culture. I contend
that these symbolic statements are encoded into Maltese guitars in layers, whose
visibility and interpretation depends on the extent of the viewer’s engagement with the
 Ghana guitar culture. As this chapter focuses on the materiality of the guitar, I will concentrate my analysis on the visual domain by examining the Maltese guitar’s physical construction and its conceptual deconstruction within the Ghana community. I turn first to broad conceptions of the guitar in Malta, before increasingly narrowing my focus on what defines a Maltese guitar. I consider the guitar as it exists through time via its visual aesthetic and symbolic associations in section 1.3.1, and by ownership and agency in section 1.3.2.

1.3.1: Local and foreign identities in the Maltese guitar

Just as Kevin Dawe suggests has been the case for guitar cultures elsewhere in the world, Ghana has also been reliant on foreign manufacturers to supply the sound-producing technology that enables its performance, thereby entangling local music traditions in a broader socio-historical and economic framework (Dawe 2013:14-15). As described above, Indri Brincat il-Pupa used Spanish and Italian guitars as templates for his models in addition to salvaging their parts and assimilating them into his own instruments. As luthiers, Brincat and his contemporaries borrowed those elements from other guitar cultures which they felt were suitable to progress the development of their own. In the process they helped to define an Ghana guitar culture, influencing the design of guitars, their timbral ideals and the sociability surrounding their production and circulation. For Dawe, luthiers

inhabit a world formed out of a unique intersection of material, social and cultural worlds. In this musical habitus (this nexus of practices, structures and structuring forces … ), these musical artisans function not merely as makers of cultural artifacts, but as agents setting a variety of social practices in motion.

(Dawe and Dawe 2001:63)
Luthiers are active cultural mediators and arbiters of taste, bridging the local and the
global by employing those materials, techniques and designs which they see as most
fitting to apply to their own tradition. However, the aesthetic choices rendered by
Maltese luthiers in their instruments are not their sole prerogative; they must be
accepted by kitarristi and other members of the ghana community. As such, any
attributes which do make their way into the ghana guitar culture must represent
acceptance by all of those involved in the tradition, thereby revealing aspects of wider
communal taste. Choosing whether to accept an innovation or change, particularly when
it clearly emanates from an external source, is a challenge to a community and can
reveal deep-seated attitudes toward self and other. As Anthony Cohen suggests, cultural
norms are often only revealed when the conventions of a community are challenged by
encountering other cultures or other ways of doing things (Cohen 1998:69).

**Ta’ barra / ta’ Malta**

The evaluation of indigenous Maltese practices and products against those of
foreign origin can be considered in relation to the ta’barra / ta’ Malta inferiority issue
that has been noted among Maltese in Malta. According to Robert Attard, its roots
appear to lie in nineteenth century British colonial rule:

Whatever was Maltese was considered to be base and valueless while whatever
came from overseas was considered to be superior. To this day a product
denominated as ‘ta’ barra’ (of foreign make) is considered to be a mark of
excellence by some Maltese. Whatever is ‘ta’ Malta’ (made in Malta) is
considered to be inferior. (Attard, R. 2001:115)
Today there continue to be political overtones to this condition. Jon Mitchell suggests that those Maltese who desire and consume European products are demonstrating a political affinity with the conservative centre-right Nationalist Party and the middle-class social strata that it represents: “Consuming European goods not only conferred European identity but also distinctions of social standing” (Mitchell 2002:114). Accordingly, European consumer items are high status Bourdieuan “positional goods”, status symbols indicative of aspirations by those of a low social status to emulate the consumption patterns of those above them (Sultana 1994:182). In her study of the ġannej Frans Baldacchino il-Budaj, Marced Zahra Sacco reports that Baldacchino determined the ta’ barra issue to be an exercise of superiority by intellectual elites (or those who identify as such) over the rest of the Maltese population – particularly in relation to language, where the aspiring middle classes are often found to favour speaking English over Maltese (Zahra Sacco 2011:142-143). Zahra Sacco points her readers towards Mehran Kamrava’s studies of the developing world in relation to the social status gained from consuming foreign goods:

Regardless of their merits, domestic cultural products are inevitably felt to embody some sort of flaw because they are not from the West. They are, in any case, seen as innately inferior to whatever cultural products have come from the West. By and large, few domestic cultural items are consciously retained and even fewer are cherished. Pride is taken in one’s degree of Westernisation rather than in the retention of identity and heritage. (Kamrava 2000:113)

Kamrava’s words might be applied equally well to Malta, whose local histories tend to foreground European heritage over an indigenous one. However, Maltese guitars invert this inferiority issue. Kitarristi will almost always prefer a Maltese-made guitar to one
made abroad, claiming that foreign guitars do not have the right tone or body shape, or have too many overtones or too much sustain (see also Bradley 2002:7).

As detailed above, there are two broad types of generally acceptable Maltese guitar: those that are constructed by a local luthier from new or appropriated materials, and those which are old, imported models that have been restored with local resources. These latter guitars are revered for their age, but I have not heard any kitarrist say they prefer this type over a similar model constructed from scratch.\textsuperscript{27} It appears that the general Maltese affinity for ta’ barra products and aesthetics over ta’ Malta does not apply to guitars – and the same is true for other Maltese traditional instruments, such as the żaqq, tanbur, żafżafà and flejguta, all of which are constructed from local materials by Maltese makers. There is pride in the product and in the artistry of its creation. In this light, it is not surprising to learn that the vast majority of those in the ġhana community are Labour Party supporters, who traditionally demonstrate less affinity with Europe and European aspirations than do Nationalists. In Spain, Dawe suggests that the luthier’s workshop represents a duality of the poetics of place and the politics of craftsmanship: “In these discourses ‘here’, rather than ‘there’, is ‘better’; whilst ‘better’ is ‘made by hand’ rather than ‘made by machine’” (Dawe and Dawe 2001:63). Among Maltese luthiers and kitarristi there are positive connotations associated with hand-making instruments, where value is placed on traditional tools and the knowledge of how to use them. ‘Place’ (Malta) – the “here, rather than there” – is determined not so much by the source of a guitar’s materials or its design aesthetic, but rather by its subsequent localisation, or indigenisation, within the insular, face-to-face networks of the ġhana community. A guitar’s circulation within this community determines its significance and acceptance, in the process becoming ta’ Malta.

\textsuperscript{27} A couple of the top younger kitarristi in Australia choose to regularly use high quality non-Maltese (often antique) guitars; however, they do still own, use and value Maltese guitars. For example, despite being a vintage guitar collector, Ray Attard’s favourite guitar for prejjem is one made for him by Indri Brincat il-Pupa from quality materials that Attard had sent him.
Acquiring a Maltese guitar is something of a word-of-mouth activity facilitated by others in the community. This is not always a quick process: a number of kitarristi recall waiting months or even years for a luthier to make a guitar for them. As these instruments are not to be found in shops, a kitarrist must visit a luthier to acquire a guitar or else purchase one from another kitarrist. Those Maltese guitars I own were purchased directly from luthiers, facilitated through friends’ introductions in an acquisition process similar to those related to me by kitarristi. Buying a guitar from a luthier adds a level of significance to the instrument, of insider-hood, of being part of a community – having a guitar made for you by Indri Brincat il-Pupa is itself something of a rite of passage toward becoming an accepted kitarrist in the ħana community.

Looking at the issue from this perspective, a ta’ Malta guitar is embedded (created, used and circulated) within a close-knit community of individuals who engage in regular face-to-face transactions; whereas a ta’ barra guitar, an imported model, implies a facelessness – it may be a quality product, but it lacks the significance that is derived from being attached to its production process. Foreign guitars have an impersonal anonymity that is alien to the insular, face-to-face networks that characterise the ħana community. Knowing the heritage of a guitar’s manufacture is equivalent to knowing the biography of one’s opponent in ħana spirtu pront. In a community where everyone knows each other intimately, it sensibly follows that a guitar should also have a discernible genealogy.

28 The kitarrist Joe Bonello is-Skuti once stated that Carmelo Grech’s guitars were so well made one would think they were foreign (interview 2013c). I initially thought this was a sleight against Grech, but realised that Bonello was in fact paying Grech a great compliment by suggesting that a locally made instrument could rival the quality of an imported one.
The indigenisation of other

Considering the guitar’s popular heritage in Malta more generally, its adoption in the mid-nineteenth century would have been determined by the convergence of a number of factors: namely, the guitar’s pre-existing popularity throughout Europe, its portability, its relatively low cost, its simplicity of construction and its versatility – factors which Banning Eyre identifies as responsible for the guitar’s widespread adoption across Africa (Eyre 2003:44). Perhaps most significantly the guitar makes a particular statement about one’s position in society, as Kevin Bradley notes in respect of Malta in the nineteenth century:

The purchase of a guitar would have required the accumulation of cash, rather than the time and skill to construct the earlier instruments such as the bagpipe and friction drum, and so been favoured by the employed rather than peasant farmers and herders. The working class kitarrist would most likely not have seen himself as a culture bound peasant but as an innovative young man embracing the new. (Bradley 2002:19)

Bradley here links ħana and instrument manufacture with industrialisation and economic and social mobility (ibid.:18-19), taking a Marxist approach that identifies a shift among the Maltese population toward acquiring the economic power to purchase a product rather than to produce it oneself. The guitar, a modern European instrument, would have appealed to young men eager to aspire to foreign (specifically British and Italian) culture rather than Maltese. However, with the economic hardships that followed the Second World War, guitars would have become even more unaffordable to most Maltese. An increase in the local production of guitars was a natural reaction to these conditions that simultaneously demonstrated a very potent political message: local
culture could be sustained locally. Yet, foreign influences are impossible to ignore in objects as glocal as guitars.

In the post-war era, Maltese luthiers and *kitarristi* have demonstrably been influenced by foreign guitars, adopting their design traits into their own tradition. We can observe this at a rudimentary level in Brincat ‘indigenising’ those foreign guitars that he had repaired by applying his own bridge to them (with its striking geometric motifs) and replacing the original maker’s label inside the body with one of his own. A more complex syncretism is found in the practices of Maltese luthiers imitating subtle Italian guitar traits, such as using a tenth fret marker, a zero fret, coloured felt on the headstock and checkered edge purfling. *Kitarristi* also participate in this syncretism, often choosing to apply floral designs or images of butterflies to the bodies of their guitars such as are found on Italian instruments. Maltese are renowned for their predilection to adorn objects with decorative embellishments and meaningful symbolic designs (the colourful markings and superstitious protective symbols that are found on *dghajsa* and *luzzu* fishing vessels are striking examples): a *kitarrist* may adorn a plain guitar with a Maltese cross, a bull, a butterfly, flowers, or even an ‘Apple’ logo. Bull iconography, a particularly favoured superstitious symbol in Malta, has featured on a number of Maltese guitars over the decades – Kalċidon Vella *ta’ Mustaċċa* recalls having once had cattle horns etched onto one of his guitars to protect him from the jealousies of other *kitarristi* (Vella interview 2013b). Allusions to animals and nature feature prominently in Maltese folklore and proverbs (see Cassar Pullicino 1992:165-198), so it is no surprise that such iconography commonly features in the designs that adorn Maltese guitars. A *kitarrist* may also choose to neatly paint, glue or

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29 In Malta, the use of cow horns as protection from the evil eye remains commonplace even today (Baldacchino 2010; Zammit-Maempel 1968). A bull is also traditionally a symbol of strength, but also of infidelity (and sexual prowess) (Zarb 1998:97).
stencil their nickname onto their guitar.\textsuperscript{30} Markings such as these are rich in symbolic meaning, communicating complex localised messages about a guitar’s history, ownership and use; yet, the heritage of this practice is also shared with Italian instruments.

These types of syncretism and cultural redefinitions are nothing new to Malta: the islands have been in intense contact with (and under the rule of) a number of foreign cultures for thousands of years, be it the Arabs in the ninth to eleventh centuries, the Sicilians in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, the various European courts of the Knights of Malta in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, or the British in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has become second nature for indigenous Maltese to adapt and redefine their practices, technology and culture to benefit from these influences. Architecture is a model example of this cultural ambivalence: grand buildings in baroque and classical European styles dominate the major cities (Valletta, Birgu, Cospicua, Senglea), but the rural farmhouse is of typical North African design with a flat roof and high ceilings (see Jaccarini 2002). Which of these is ‘Maltese’? Neither; and both. The Maltese ‘harp’ guitar is a pronounced example of this kind of adoption and redefinition of foreign designs and aesthetics that has come to be regarded as a distinctly Maltese cultural trait. The Maltese ‘harp’ guitar is clearly a design that has been borrowed from abroad, yet it has been so successfully appropriated that for the past forty years it has represented the most ‘traditional’ of Maltese guitars. I believe there are two reasons for this. Firstly, the \textit{tromba} is an addition to the \textit{terżin} or \textit{kitarrina} guitar; the Maltese ‘harp’ guitar is not in fact a radical constructional shift away from established guitar designs. The \textit{tromba} appendage (as it is perhaps best described)

\textsuperscript{30} The earliest possible reference I have found to the practice of etching a name on a guitar is in Bertha Ilg’s collection of \textit{għana} stanzas first published in 1909 (translated by Cassar Pullicino): “\textit{Ħanini ghandu kiterra / Fiha l-isem u l-kunjom}” (“My beloved has a guitar / It bears his name and surname”) (Ilg and Stumme 1909 in Koessler-Ilg and Cassar Pullicino 1962:14). However, Borg Cardona (2014:158) translates this more literally as “it bears a name and surname” and suggests that it identifies a foreign luthier rather than a local guitarist.
serves little functional purpose beyond its visual impact. A terżin tat-tromba does not require any additional skill to make or play than a terżin and it does not require much more time or expense to build. Secondly, and most importantly, the design is synonymous with Indri Brincat il-Pupa. The importance of Brincat in presenting this change and in influencing its acceptance through his dominating position as a master kitarrist, musical innovator and prolific, celebrated luthier must be taken into account.31 Few in the ġhana community today question the heritage and symbolism of the tromba; they do not recall when Brincat first introduced it, nor do they speculate on its foreign origins. It is a highly symbolic form of Maltese guitar with a close associative relationship to Brincat and with Maltese ġhana. Kitarristi who perform with or talk about this model do so in an almost reverential, patriotic manner. Whether this is an expression of patriotism to Malta, to ġhana or to the spirit of Brincat himself is difficult to judge; perhaps it is all three. The indigenisation of the European harp guitar into a Maltese pseudo-harp guitar is achieved principally through the influence of human agency, specifically that of Indri Brincat il-Pupa. To wield this model of Maltese guitar is to make a particular statement about Malteseness and cultural heritage. However, other Maltese guitars can be just as symbolic, providing one knows what to look for.

1.3.2: Layers of symbolism in the Maltese guitar

In this section I detail what I determine to be the layers of symbolism that are embedded in and interpreted from the guitar via the influence of human agency. Acknowledging the importance of this human-object dynamic, Lynn Meskell remarks that “[s]tudies of materiality cannot simply focus upon the characteristics of objects but must engage in the dialectic of people and things” (Meskell 2008:242). Meanings are

31 In light of Brincat’s omnipresence across ġhana’s guitar culture, the following quote by the organologist James Westbrook comes to mind: “The craftsman provides the sound; the composer explores the sound and the performer extracts the sound” (Westbrook 2002:7). As Brincat pioneered developments in all three of these domains, his influence (and authority) in instigating change is perhaps not surprising.
constructed for objects via relationships that are being continuously recast through a process of “evocation”, what Marius Kwint identifies as “an open dialogue between the object, the maker and the consumer”, which stresses the effects of specific objects and their properties (such as their look or sound) on the stimulation and storage of memories through time (Kwint 1999:3). This suggests that the meanings constructed for an object can evolve over time, and also highlights the probability that several different dialogues and memories may be simultaneously stimulated by one object.

A Maltese guitar is invested with a variety of co-existing meanings which are constructed for it by those who view and use it: it is a Maltese guitar, it is made by a certain luthier, it is owned by a particular *kitarrist*, it is played in specific venues in front of certain audiences. This sociohistorical knowledge is mediated through the guitar. As Timothy Dant details, following Marshall McLuhan’s contention of “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964),

> A mediating object is one that carries communication between people – information, emotions, ideas and expressions that could have been communicated by speech, gesture, touch or expression – if the people had been with each other. The mediating object carries messages across space or time (or both) between people who are not co-present. (Dant 1999:153)

As just such a mediating object, a Maltese guitar can connect (perhaps suture) together people, places and histories. Yet, meaning is only derived from a guitar by those who understand the implications of its signs: an observer’s understanding of, and interaction with, the meanings encoded within a Maltese guitar is dependent on his or her level of involvement with the *ghana* community, specifically its guitar culture. The closer one is
to the heart of the community through deep and continued engagement, the more complex and semiotically rich are the layers of symbolism that are revealed.

There are two types of messages transmitted through a Maltese guitar: those messages that have been inscribed into its physical form and design, and those which are mediated through its musical manipulation in the hands of a kitarrist (indicative of how a guitar is an object that can be “turned on” to deliver more complex messages (see Dant 1999:154)). These messages are ultimately triggered and transmitted through human agency. I suggest that the Maltese guitar embodies four layers of symbolic messages that are encoded in its aesthetic design. Each layer requires increasingly detailed knowledge about the musical community to interpret its significance, suggesting that a dynamic relationship exists between the object and its viewer.

The first layer: iconic signs. This layer is simply the guitar as imagined; as a semiotic iconic sign that represents ġhana and Maltese folk traditions. The acoustic guitar became closely associated with ġhana in the late nineteenth century, since when it has become increasingly representative of Maltese culture more generally.32 The iconography of the 1878 il Ghannej publication, illustrated in figure 4, suggests that the guitar is by this time already an iconic symbol of ġhana (the title of this publication, after all, refers to “the folk singer”, not “the folk guitarist” or “the folk musician”). In the present day the guitar remains a ubiquitous symbol of ġhana. For example, the annual Maltese folklore music festival Ghanafest has used stylised renderings of an acoustic guitar in its logo since its inception in 2008 (figure 24).33

32 For example, in the 1960s the Maltese prime minister Ġorġ Borg Olivier presented a guitar made by Indri Brincat il-Pupa to the Japanese prime minister as a gift from Malta (Casha interview 2014a).

33 For the 2013 festival a physical version of the guitar wrapped in brown parcel paper that is seen in figure 24 was given as a gift by the Ghanafest team to parliamentary secretary Jose Herrera at a promotional event (Malta Independent 2013).
The second layer: object and origins. This is the first layer for which a level of insider knowledge is necessary to identify a Maltese guitar as a particular type of guitar. This layer requires the recognition of general construction and design attributes that conform to a ‘locally produced’ aesthetic: small, unrefined, decorative guitars, or, of course, the ‘harp’ guitar. Foreign models, brand names, colours, or types of wood not associated with locally made guitars are recognised as such. Some Maltese guitars can, however, look foreign – particularly so when they incorporate foreign components, such
as Brincat’s guitars often do. This layer of symbolism can, thus, be composed of quite subtle referents.

The third layer: luthier identification. At this level the guitar transcends its function as a musical instrument and reveals symbolic referents that betray specific luthiers’ aesthetic design choices. Characteristic luthier markings are Brincat’s bridge designs, Attard’s checkered edge purfling, Grech’s bold decorations and crucifixes, and Salvu Farrugia’s penchant for a small butterfly design on the soundboard. Such markings instantly identify the constructional heritage of a guitar to insiders, marking it as a Maltese guitar by a particular luthier rather than being of unidentified or foreign origin, whilst simultaneously affording the luthier a kind of local brand identification. The constructional heritage of a guitar may also reveal something of the player’s ability or status within the musical community, much in the way that Western musicians often make judgments about a player by looking at the brand name on his guitar’s headstock.

The fourth layer: performer identification. Within this layer of aesthetic design are those markings that the kitarrist wishes to add to his guitar. Sometimes no further identification is felt necessary; however, as described above, some kitarristi choose to personalise their guitars by adding their nickname, colourful iconography or stickers to the body of their instrument. These adornments are often iconic signs of a personal nature which may reveal aspects of the owner’s personality that also prevail outside of his involvement in the musical community.

The third and fourth layers are generally only recognised by those who are involved more deeply in the guitar culture of the ghana community – typically kitarristi. Crucially, these two layers are biographical. These markings establish a guitar’s meaning beyond imagined histories and general cultural associations to connote specific human interactions that have been established within the ghana community. All four of these symbolic layers and their interpretation (particularly these latter two) exist
in two states: knowledge that is imbued upon and transmitted through the guitar as it exists at a moment in time, and the transformation of that knowledge through time. If a guitar can possess a biography then we must consider the capacity for it to evolve and transform in meaning over time in relation to the social relationships that enliven it (following Dant 1999:131). By this, I particularly infer the transference of symbolic associations as an instrument passes between owners. This issue is investigated in the following two examples. In the first, I examine the symbolic significance of a kitarrist acquiring a guitar that has been associated with a master kitarrist, and in the second I evaluate how a guitar can become a material memorial to a deceased kitarrist as an embodiment of his personality and his legacy.

Memorabilia and memoriality: two case studies of symbolic transformation

The guitar used most prominently by Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Aħmar (1929–1981) was made for him in the early 1960s by Indri Brincat il-Pupa. A year after Farrugia’s death Kalċidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa visited his family home offering to buy the instrument. Vella had admired Farrugia’s style of playing, but the pair had not been on friendly terms: when he was performing, Farrugia would often turn his body away from Vella so that he could not copy his techniques. Nevertheless, it appears that Farrugia held a grudging respect for Vella, who has since become one of the most highly regarded prim kitarristi in Malta and the foremost exponent of Farrugia’s style of playing. When Vella approached Farrugia’s son, Charlie, offering to purchase the guitar, Vella’s stylistic affinity with Farrugia and the respect that he held for him was noted by Charlie and his offer was accepted – despite many other kitarristi having had their offers rejected (Vella interview 2012; interview 2013b). Vella has continued to use it as

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34 There are many similar accounts of animosities between Farrugia and other kitarristi. I consider this issue further in chapter three.
his primary guitar to the present day, describing it as the best out of the dozens that he has purchased (Vella interview 2012; interview 2013b). Yet, I suspect that much of the admiration he has for this guitar is due to its having been owned and prized by his musical idol, one of the handful of prim kitarristi who are revered today as masters (or kitarristi fin, those with a “special touch” (Casha interview 2014c; 2014d)).

This guitar is a typical Maltese terżin made by Brincat, replete with his distinctive luthier identification markings. It incorporates a spruce top from an old Spanish guitar and a relatively small, shallow body that produces a loud, bright, penetrating tone. The enormously thick neck and high action make it a difficult guitar to play, but Vella is a burly man with a technique to match. The soundboard bears highly recognisable, unique graphic designs of a Spanish torrero and bull, a flamenco dancer and an unusual black and white swirled pickguard (figure 25). This guitar is a highly symbolic object within the Maltese ġhana community, particularly as it embodies a great deal of messages that are associated with the fourth layer of aesthetic design, performer identification. Farrugia’s relationship with the guitar seems to be remembered mostly by an older generation of kitarristi (those born around the 1950s), all of whom knew Farrugia personally. Audio recordings of Farrugia’s playing are not as common as those of other kitarristi contemporary to him and I am not aware of him featuring in any videos. Therefore, his impact on today’s kitarristi seems limited to those who knew him in life or who actively seek out recordings of his performances. Despite this, Farrugia’s influence on Vella’s generation is substantial and he remains highly regarded by them. Owning this guitar is a powerful statement for Vella, confirming his musical ability to himself and to those who recognise the history of this particular guitar. Today, it is unequivocally identified as Vella’s guitar. When other kitarristi have asked me whether I knew Kalč, he was often described to me as “the one with the flamenco dancer on his guitar”. This particular guitar has transferred ownership and taken on a second life.
Fig. 25. Kalčidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa with the guitar that once belonged to Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Ahmar. Photographed at Ghanafest, Malta, 2010 (courtesy Andrew Sammut).

However, as this next example reveals, some guitars are considered so thoroughly imbued with an individual’s personality that on his death they are taken out of circulation in order to protect his legacy. Another among the handful of kitarristi fin was Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl (1943–1996). An enigmatic figure, Aquilina’s reputation as an innovative prim kitarrist with a prodigious talent is maintained to the present day through the legacy of his audio and video recordings and the memories of him that are recalled by those who knew him personally. Aquilina learned his style directly from the famed prim kitarrist Karmnu Cardona it-Tapp, who is regarded as the inventor of prejjem. So close were the pair that Cardona bequeathed his favourite guitar to Aquilina on his death in the late 1960s. For reasons that are currently unknown, Aquilina turned away from ghana in the late 1970s. A decade later he sold a set of three
guitars to prim kitarrist and ghannej Steve Ciantar il-Furkett (Aquilina interview 2013; Ciantar interview 2013). Nevertheless, Aquilina continued to play prejjem and also flamenco at home, privately, with his son, George, and one or two close friends. After Aquilina’s death in 1996, George began to question why his father had not been afforded the same respect given to other ghannejja and kitarristi who had, for instance, been honoured by statues and memorials erected in their hometowns. George Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl subsequently bought back his father’s guitars from Ciantar and began to assemble a collection of photographs and audio and video recordings of his late father.35 For George, re-acquiring his father’s guitars and other physical ephemera relating to him is an important process in consolidating his musical legacy and controlling access to it. As will be examined in chapter three of this thesis, the impact and influence of Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl has been limited due to the relative inaccessibility and rarity of his recordings. However, this ‘untapped resource’ has become extremely attractive to young kitarristi such as Frederick Mallia ir-Re and Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestrú (both born in the 1990s), who have engaged with his style to a large extent via George Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl. For his son, Aquilina’s guitars hold particular value as they were tools of his trade; they are the objects through which his father expressed his personality (Aquilina interview 2013) and thereby embody something of his aura.

There are two intersecting points of interest raised by these two examples: the anthropomorphising impress of personality into an object, and the memoriality of that object on the passing of its distinguished owner.36 A particular guitar becomes associated with a kitarrist through his own selection of it over others, but meaning is also conferred upon the instrument by observers in the musical community as the

35 A further two guitars originally owned by Cardona and then by Aquilina now reside in Melbourne, Australia. George Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl is eager to reclaim these instruments, too.

36 Memoriality is a term most often used in archaeology and theology to study the circulation of idols and saints’ relics (see Schmitt 2009; Gayk 2010:123-154).
owner’s career unfolds over a period of time. A guitar takes on the personality of its owner, becoming part of his identity. As an object, Vella’s guitar has become a powerful symbol of his playing style. His fiery, frenetic approach to prejjem is akin to flamenco – a style which his daughter, Denise, has found an affinity with through dance. Within the ghana community, this guitar is universally recognised as Vella’s; few kitarristi today recognise it as Farrugia’s guitar. Indeed, it could be argued that Vella, in equalling or surpassing the prominence that Farrugia had attained, has impressed an even more dominating stamp onto the guitar. From this perspective, there appears to have been a certain inevitability in this guitar’s transference to Vella. Describing ritual objects in an Indonesian community, Janet Hoskins suggests how:

[P]restigious objects could help to make history by ‘choosing’ their proper location and exerting a mysterious influence on their human guardians to assure that they ended up there ... Power objectified in a concrete object preserves an impression of stability even when the object comes into the possession of a rival; thus, it can legitimate usurpation while maintaining a fiction of continuity. (Hoskins 2006:79)

Applying this idea to the trajectory of Farrugia’s guitar, upon his death it would seem natural that Farrugia’s guitar should pass onto the one individual whose musical style most reflected his own (a significant contributing factor to the rivalry that Farrugia felt with Vella), thereby continuing Farrugia’s style of playing through Vella. Although it was the ghana community who effectively directed the guitar toward Vella, there does appear an inevitability to this trajectory that no doubt contributes to the magical aura that this instrument continues to exude.
Aquilina’s guitars have also taken on a special meaning, particularly to his son (manifested in his desire to reacquire them after his death) and to those *kitarristi* who idolise Aquilina. Steve Ciantar *il-Furkett*, for example, keenly cites Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* as one of the top *prim kitarristi* alongside Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* and Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*. Thus, the status conferred by the musical community on Ciantar by his owning and using Aquilina’s guitars would have been immense during the period he possessed them in the 1980s and 1990s. It is unlikely that Ciantar would have sold the guitars to anyone other than Aquilina or his son. On the death of their owner, the guitars of most *kitarristi* tend to stay in the family as heirlooms (although their lesser used ones may well be sold on (Vella interview 2013b)). Therefore, to acquire a particularly symbolic instrument after the owner’s death is unusual and is in itself a particularly symbolic transaction.

As objects with the capacity to be inscribed with personalities and biographies, Maltese guitars are clearly valuable commodity items that represent a currency amongst knowledgeable *kitarristi* in their transference from luthier to *kitarrass*, or between *kitarristi*. By “questioning” the biography of an object, Kopytoff prompts us to consider the human agency that lies behind the meanings ascribed to such objects and their circulation:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people ... Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff 1986:66-67)
As I have demonstrated, if we ask these questions of a Maltese guitar such as Vella’s or those originally owned by Aquilina we can evaluate their position and value within the ghana community as particular significant objects among others. As Dant highlights, over time the value of an object varies due to its relationships with other objects:

[An] object is always singular in so far as it is produced, exchanged, possessed and used as a thing. But it always exists in relation to series of other objects, more or less similar, more or less different, that give that thing its meaning, its degree of singularity ... Over time that set of relations changes and with it the meaning and value of the object in the culture. (Dant 1999:151)

Similarly, a Maltese guitar exists in a network of relationships to other Maltese guitars and their owners – relationships which mirror the interconnected, face-to-face networks of the individuals who comprise the ghana community itself. As memories of particular individuals and their relationships with particular guitars fade over time, so too does the knowledge with which to identify the physical markers that determine these associations. We can interrogate a guitar’s biography (its trajectory through a community’s history) by examining its materiality, but the interpretation of these biographic details inscribed in its form exist beyond the guitar itself – they are embedded and negotiated within the social networks of the ghana community. A guitar’s auto-biography is limited to the luthier’s name and address attached on a label inside the instrument and by any design markings on the body that may indicate its owner by name or nickname. The guitar itself cannot speak its own history, only mediate it. Without the knowledge about it which exists within the guitar culture that surrounds the guitar, we can learn very little from the object itself. Indeed, we are limited to layers one and two of my model of symbolic messages, thereby missing out
on a rich variety of more subtle information that is, in fact, of vital importance to the community and its constructions of insider-hood. Understanding the circulation of a guitar among recognisable individuals within the *ghana* community – the human agency that suspends the instrument in a web of culture – and the significance behind these transactions adds value to it as a symbol of that community (much in the way that the value of Bourdieuan positional goods lay in their extrinsic rather than intrinsic value).

It is no longer simply a Maltese guitar, but *Joe’s* guitar made by *Indri*.

If an object can be subject to the impress of personality, then its potency as a symbol of memoriality on the death of its owner surely follows. This seems to have been the case in the examples of Żeppi Farrugia *ta’l-Ahmar* and Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl*. A guitar associated with a particular *kitarrist* or luthier continues to exist after his death, becoming endowed with an almost supernatural power by transcending the mortality of its owner or maker. As time passes from Indri Brincat *il-Pupa*’s death in 2010, it remains to be seen whether the many guitars of his that remain in circulation begin to take on material memoriality. Certainly, his own personal guitars are carefully preserved by his family and a handful of close friends. Brincat was a living legend within the *ghana* community and beyond, and his instruments were unquestionably the pre-eminent choice for *kitarristi* during his lifetime. For now, there are enough of his guitars in good working order to go around, but I suspect these instruments will become increasingly desirable as time passes and will be repaired by other luthiers rather than replaced. Brincat’s guitars are material memorials to him and to his many contributions to *ghana*, being objects through which his spirit is manifested every time a *kitarrist* strums their strings.
Conclusion

More than any other individual, Indri Brincat il-Pupa’s personal aesthetic preferences have shaped the visual and aural norms of ġhana’s guitar culture. Many of these norms are mediated and transmitted through the guitar as a physical object (musical norms are examined further in chapter two). Certain physical aspects of the Maltese guitar indicate practical responses to the environment in which ġhana exists: constructional strength is required to withstand the extremes of weather that afflict the islands and any damage that the instrument may sustain in bars, locally sourced woods may be of low quality but they are plentiful and there is existing knowledge of how to work them, and materials are often recycled to save on cost and wastage. These guitars are made in a particular way, for a particular purpose, to be used in particular environments. Other aspects of the Maltese guitar transcend this functionality and mediate knowledge about individuals and their involvement with ġhana. The personal markings that are incorporated onto guitars by luthiers and kitarristi help to construct biographical meaning for instruments that can be interpreted by those in the know. The impression of luthier and kitarrist personalities into the guitar as agents of transmission, and the place of memoriality on their passing, adds a further dynamic to what is transmitted through the guitar and to the construction and interpretation of the meanings of these transactions through time.

The model of symbolic layering that I have detailed is a useful way to conceive of this knowledge and its transmission, implying that scratching away at the surface of a guitar reveals further layers of symbolism beneath. This metaphor works on both tangible and intangible levels. In deconstructing the physical guitar we encounter foreign influences intersecting with local needs and requirements, revealing how the Maltese guitar remains a glocal instrument despite a great deal of local customisation. Interpreting these symbolic local messages – particularly the more subtle ones – is a
dynamic, active process that reveals the *ghana* community’s ever-shifting distinctions through time between local and global, insider and outsider. Meanings and messages transmitted through guitars are ultimately malleable: they can change, be replaced or forgotten through time as the recognition of these messages evolve or fade from the community’s collective memory. However, it is this capacity for change that marks the *ghana* guitar tradition as dynamic and relevant today. The guitar itself, as a functional and symbolic icon for a musical community with few other tangible assets, is a key mediating object through which heritage, knowledge, identity and repertoire is invested, negotiated and transmitted.
CHAPTER TWO

Transmitting style: developing
the musical norms of prejjem
In this chapter I examine the stylistic norms of prejjem and the musical practices and roles of kitarristi. I provide evidence of modifications to musical structures, performance techniques and improvisation processes over the past eighty years, focusing particular attention on the impact that a handful of leading prim kitarristi have had on establishing and transmitting these transformations during this period. As such, continuing the biographical theme of the previous chapter, this is a study of transmission that foregrounds the influence of notable individuals as agents of musical transformation.

Throughout this chapter I am mindful of the need to maintain a balance between what William Washabaugh determines as “top-down” and “bottom-up” analytical approaches. Washabaugh declares that a “top-down” methodology which “looks to clarify genres from their origins to their present conditions” in terms of evolutionary processes risks essentialising its subject into a series of reified historical events, relegating the significance of contemporary performances to “reincarnations of past realities” (Washabaugh 1996:viii). Nevertheless, there is value in taking this approach here due to the inherently historical, essentialist nature by which ghana is perceived by its practitioners. Prim kitarristi, acutely aware of prejjem’s history, delight in playing the characteristic motifs and techniques that define the styles of their contemporaries and predecessors. Often these musical elements have been learned from those most reified of sources: recordings. These audio-visual documents are, however, essentialist only in their fixing of a performance of the tradition, of one kitarrist’s interpretation of the tradition at a particular moment in time. Five different prim kitarristi recorded on the same day might improvise in five subtly different ways. Due to a large extent to the pervasiveness of consumer audio recording technology since the late 1950s, a number of stylistic schools of playing co-exist in the present day. Since the second half of the twentieth century, a kitarrist has been able to develop his musical style through the
influence of an array of kitarristi, living and deceased, by means of physical encounters as well as via the medium of recordings. Therefore, whilst some elements of the prejjem tradition have undergone linear development in the form of evolutionary progression, non-linear forms have also simultaneously emerged in which styles of playing that have fallen out of favour in one generation have been revived and adapted by the next, or where compatible styles of playing from different eras have been grafted together (issues that will be examined further in chapter three).

In light of this we might apply Washabaugh’s alternative to the top-down approach, “bottom-up”, which acknowledges that a musical tradition is “realized in performance, and always approached as an ever-emerging reality” in which,

Every next performance restructures all that has preceded. Though a melody or a lyric or rhythm may seem to be passed down from past artists, it always undergoes transformation in the course of being performed. It is recreated in and through the novel contexts of its production and audition – a condition that is as true of recorded music as it is of live performance. The new contexts in which we listen to old disks help to recreate musical style. (ibid.:ix)

Certainly, the freedom by which melodies or stylistic traits that are derived from historic ghana recordings can be comfortably incorporated into modern-day prejjem suggests this is not a style that is intrinsically rooted in monumental, “periodised” evolution (following Washabaugh, ibid.:viii), but one that is continuously being re-evaluated and remade by kitarristi and their audiences in the present. That is not to say there have not been relatively large stylistic shifts, but that these developments did not for the most part replace existing forms but instead co-existed with them. Nevertheless, a transmission study must take a chronology of developments into consideration. A study
of the improvisational processes of notable kitarristi is a suitably “bottom-up” approach for comprehending the practice of prejjem, but only insofar as to comprehend the cultural and musical contexts within which those particular kitarristi developed their styles – it would be speculative to make generalisations from these accounts. Therefore, in order to usefully draw upon both of these methodologies this chapter develops a historical approach to the evolution of general style norms whilst highlighting the contextual developments of iconic individuals who have made particularly significant modifications to these norms. I examine these issues largely from the perspective of present-day kitarristi.

An important point that underscores this chapter is that an akkumpanjist may choose to embellish the norms of the prejjem tradition, but a prim kitarrist can innovate with them. It is prim kitarristi who stimulate stylistic changes to prejjem by developing original approaches to improvising and by exerting their aesthetic preferences upon their accompanying ensembles. In fact, many akkumpanjisti possess limited technical and practical knowledge of their instrument beyond the basic chords – an ensemble’s prim kitarrist often tunes the akkumpanjament guitars himself, although this is often something of a symbolic assertion of power (Bradley 2002:48-49). Some kitarristi today suggest that there are only three distinctive styles of prim playing (referred to as ‘schools’ from here on) out of which all others have developed (Attard interview 2014; Galea interview 2014): that of Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp (c.1894–c.1965), Indri Brincat il-Pupa (1920–2010) and Žeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Ahmar (1929–1981). Each sought to develop prejjem’s musical potential in relation to what had gone before and, ultimately, to promote the status of kitarristi within għana. Cardona favoured fast, delicately ornamented phrases that reflected a southern European influence; Brincat preferred slower, more precise and lyrical statements; whilst Farrugia employed an explosive, fragmented, technique-rich style afforded by his use of a plectrum. These three styles of
playing heavily influenced contemporary and successive generations of kitarristi and have since become stylistic cornerstones of prejjem today.

In section 2.1 I present the fundamental musical concepts of the guitar ensemble and of ġhana more generally, and note the terminology that daqqaqa use to describe their musical system. In section 2.2 I describe the akkumpanjament component of the ensemble, detailing the roles, musical structures and chord patterns that akkumpanjisti employ. Finally, in section 2.3 I examine the roles of a prim kitarrist, the musical ideals he expresses, and I analyse examples of representative improvisations for each of the three schools of prejjem.

2.1 Ghana musical terminology

Understanding the local musical language that daqqaqa use to describe and communicate their musical system is essential in order to comprehend the discussions that follow. Although the terminology employed by daqqaqa is appropriated from Western music theory, their definitions do not always correspond with established conventions. This has caused confusion among some scholars, leading to misinformation having been published. However, the system is quite sensible when one understands that Maltese guitarists ‘think’ in guitar chord fingerings, not in keys: ġhana musical terminology is derived from practice, not theory. Although a variety of pitched instruments besides the guitar have been incorporated into ġhana over the centuries (as noted in chapter one), ġhana’s musical language today appears to derive from idiosyncrasies peculiar to the guitar.
Guitar keys and tunings

In a modern ghana guitar trio each guitar is tuned differently to one another, thereby presenting three distinct tonal spaces and sonic identities. The three tessituras are as follows:

*Prim* guitar (‘Sol’ guitar): tuned a whole tone higher than concert pitch.

First *akkumpanjament* guitar (‘La’ guitar): tuned to concert pitch.

Second *akkumpanjament* guitar (‘Doh’ guitar): tuned a minor third below concert pitch.

In some instances (according to the taste of the *prim kitarrist*, the key of the piece, or in the absence of a capable Doh *kitarrist*) the Doh guitar may be replaced by a second La guitar. As I will reveal shortly, in practice there are often further alterations to the tuning of the strings of the Doh and *prim* guitars which have the effect of simplifying chord patterns for the Doh *kitarrist* and facilitating particular melodic passages for the *prim kitarrist*. Additionally, the tuning of the whole ensemble may be lowered or raised by anywhere up to a tone depending on the inclination of the *prim kitarrist* or on the preferred tessitura of any *ghannejja* that are present.\(^{37}\) Tuning the La guitar to concert pitch is known as *kurista*. This is deemed a range that *ghannejja* should find no trouble to sing within and that *kitarristi* find comfortable to play – if guitar strings are tuned too high the increased tension can be uncomfortable for the fingers; if too low, volume and timbre may be compromised (Tanti interview 2013a; Vella interview 2013a). What is important is that the strings are tuned accurately to one another and to the other guitars in the ensemble (Bonello interview 2013a), an aesthetic ideal that is known as *il-kitarri pinna*, “the guitars are perfectly tuned” (Casha 2014d), or *qniepen*, “sounding like a

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37 Kitarristi in Malta rarely use a pitch-pipe or other fixed-pitch device for tuning their instruments, although electronic tuners are common in Australia.
bell” (Grech interview 2013b). A good performance relies fundamentally on good tuning.

When tuning the ensemble, it is usually the prim guitar that is tuned first – usually to a range that the prim kitarrist feels is most sonorous for his own guitar (see Attard 2002; Bradley 2002:44, 46, 48-49).38 The La kitarrist then tunes his open fifth string to the open third string of the prim guitar. The La guitar can then be tuned to itself by fretting on its other strings. The Doh kitarrist tunes his open third string to the prim kitarrist’s open fourth string. Like the La guitar, the Doh guitar can then be tuned to itself (Ronnie Borg personal communication 2014; Joe Cutajar personal communication 2015).

In the following descriptions we shall assume the tuning of the La guitar to be to concert pitch, kurista. The La guitar, takes a central position in the ensemble and is tuned E-A-d-g-b-e’, as in figure 26.

![Fig. 26. La guitar tuning.](image)

The Doh guitar is tuned a minor third below the La guitar – E-F#-B-e-g#-c’#, as in figure 27.

![Fig. 27. Doh guitar tuning.](image)

38 Sometimes it is the La guitar that is tuned first, particularly if concert pitch is desired. If this is the case, the prim guitar will be tuned second and the Doh guitar last.
The open sixth string of the Doh guitar remains pitched at E when playing in ‘sol’ (sounding in the key of A major, as explained in the following section subtitled ‘Solfège’), the most common key for ghana and prejjem and the most common key for which the Doh guitar is regularly used. This tuning deviation permits the unfretted sixth string to vibrate at the dominant pitch of this key, proving less fatiguing to play and simplifying the pattern for the Doh akkumpanjist (Vella interview 2013a). However, for pieces not in this key this string would be tuned a minor third lower, at a pitch of C#.

The *prim* guitar is tuned a tone above concert pitch, reinforcing its sonic ideal of a strained, bright timbre with minimal sustain. There are three tuning variations for the *prim* guitar. Akkordat (accorded) is a uniform transposition that raises all of the strings by a tone, F#-B-e-a-c’#-f’, as in figure 28. Transpurtat (transported) modifies this by lowering the first string by a tone, to give F#-B-e-a-c’#-e’, as in figure 29. A second variation of transpurtat features the same lowered first string, but also raises the akkordat sixth string by a further tone, G#-B-e-a-c’#-e’, as in figure 30.

![Fig. 28. Prim guitar tuning, akkordat.](image)

![Fig. 29. Prim guitar tuning, transpurtat (first string only).](image)

![Fig. 30. Prim guitar tuning, transpurtat (first and sixth strings).](image)
From an analytical perspective, when both the first and sixth strings are altered (as in figure 30) a pair of triads are formed on the open strings: a-c’#-e’ on the top three strings, and G#-B-e on the bottom three (see also Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:75). When playing in the key of sol (sounding as A major), these two groups of strings can be open-strummed when on the tonic or dominant segment, respectively, of each stanza, providing the prim kitarrist with an unfretted chordal grounding which he may take advantage of if he wishes to rest his fretting hand during an ghannej’s ghan spiirtu pront verse. Whilst this feature may be useful, tuning modifications to the prim guitar are ultimately chosen to facilitate techniques (such as tremolos) and melodic patterns. Not all prim kitarristi agree, however, on which tuning modification is best for each key (Bonello 2013a; John Grima personal communication 2013; Vella interview 2013a). Choosing which form of tuning to employ is thus not necessarily dictated by the key of the piece being played, but is rather an aesthetic choice by the prim kitarrist that quite often indicates his stylistic school.

Solfège

One of the main sources of confusion over ghan’s musical nomenclature has emanated from the application of solfège terms to four distinct yet interrelated aspects of the tradition.

1. The conventional key for ghan spiirtu pront – the most commonly performed subgenre of ghan – is known as sol; however, this indicates the tonic chord of the piece as figured on the prim guitar, not the actual sounding key of the piece. When playing ghan spiirtu pront in sol each kitarrist plays the tonic chord shape that also identifies his guitar in the ensemble: G major (Sol guitar, prim), A major (La guitar, first akkumpanjament) and C major (Doh guitar, second akkumpanjament). Due to their altered tunings, when all three guitars play these tonic chords simultaneously the
resulting chord sounds the same; they are simply different inversions of the same chord. Figure 31 shows each of the three guitars’ typical string tunings when playing in sol, followed by tablature for the tonic and dominant-seventh chords.

![Tablature for Tonic and Dominant-7th Chords](image)

**Fig. 31. Kitarra ensemble’s string tunings and tablature for tonic and dominant-seventh chords in the key of sol.**

2. Regardless of the actual key of the piece being played (and each guitar’s tonic chords being accordingly transposed) the prim guitar will still be referred to as the Sol guitar, the first akkumpanjament guitar as the La guitar and the second akkumpanjament guitar as the Doh guitar. These labels are fixed designations and are not transposable. Thus, as an example, if a piece is in re, then D major is the tonic chord of the piece for the Sol (prim) guitar, E major for the La guitar, and G major for the Doh guitar.
3. The solfège labelling for the key of a piece is not necessarily the actual sounding key, as the *prim* guitar is usually tuned a tone higher than concert pitch. Thus, the key of sol sounds as A major. Pieces are sometimes referred to by *kitarristi* as, for instance, “doh-re” to indicate that the *prim kitarrist* plays doh as his tonic and the La *kitarrist* plays re as his (Aquilina interview 2013; Tanti interview 2013b). *Minore* is used as a suffix to identify minor key pieces, although the major suffix (*maggiore*) is usually omitted – being implied rather than explicitly stated.

4. Finally, chords are designated by fixed solfège terminology. It is not a moveable system: doh is always C major, re is always D major, mi is always E major, and so on.

2.2 The *akkumpanjament*

The *akkumpanjament* is the fundamental grounding on which ghana is built and upon which the *prim kitarrist* improvises his melodies. As outlined in chapter one, references to guitars accompanying ghana begin to appear in the mid-nineteenth century, although evidence for a formal ensemble and the label “*prim*” are not found until the first commercial ghana recordings of 1931-1932. It is not currently known when the Sol-La-Doh trio with its complementary altered tunings first appeared, but there is little local historic precedent to suggest that it derives from “ancient” ensemble forms beyond the nineteenth century, as some academics have suggested (Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:74; Herndon 1971:97-98). It is rather more likely that it is yet another example of a relatively recent cultural borrowing of the type evidenced in chapter one. Nevertheless, recordings made in the early 1930s reveal that at least some of the aspects of an altered tuning system were already in existence at this time. In the absence of earlier historical data, my study of *prejjem*’s style must begin here, with the first recordings of ghana in 1931-1932.
The guitar ensembles featured in these recordings comprise two \textit{kitarristi}. In most instances this was \textit{prim kitarrist} Karmenu Cardona \textit{it-Tapp}, confirmed on twenty-four recordings, and his \textit{akkumpanjist} on twenty recordings Ghejtu Azzopardi \textit{il-Gass}.\textsuperscript{39} Although a duo rather than a trio may have been the standard guitar ensemble at some point in \textit{ghana}'s history, the use of two \textit{kitarristi} in these recordings may well have been a logistical response to recording sessions that often took place outside of Malta, namely in Milan and Tunis, and to the limitations of the recording technology of the time.\textsuperscript{40} The earliest firm evidence for guitar trios (one \textit{prim kitarrist} and two \textit{akkumpanjist}) being commonplace is their prominence at the 1953 Mnarja \textit{festa} competition and its subsequent annual stagings. Since then a trio has remained the norm. Local lore suggests that it was Indri Brincat \textit{il-Pupa} who developed the Sol-La-Doh ensemble some time around the Second World War – a story often propagated by Brincat himself. However, although Brincat certainly refined the tradition and (through his popularity) formalised the keys and tuning of the guitar ensemble, it is doubtful that he in fact invented any of these norms.

Cardona and Azzopardi’s 1931-1932 recordings as a duo reveal to us interesting details that suggest the component parts of the Sol-La-Doh trio were already in existence at this time (before Brincat began to play), even if there are no actual trio ensemble recordings from this period. Firstly, in most of these recordings Cardona and Azzopardi appear to be playing in different tunings to one another and, as \textit{prim} and La guitars, are tuned a tone apart (as detailed in section 2.1). Most pieces are in the key of

\textsuperscript{39} An additional five recordings from this period feature Azzopardi as the \textit{prim kitarrist}. Other \textit{kitarristi} were also recorded at this time, including Emmanuel Mercieca \textit{is-Semenza}, Emmanuel Cilia \textit{ta’Zabbett}, Guzeppe Xuereb \textit{ix-Xudi} and Guzeppe Prato, although all but Prato were primarily \textit{ghannejja}.

\textsuperscript{40} The first CD of \textit{ghana}, recorded in France in 1992, also featured a pared-down ensemble of two \textit{ghannejja} and two \textit{kitarristi} (one \textit{prim} and one \textit{akkumpanjist}), demonstrating a similar economic choice for an \textit{ghana} recording made abroad in more recent years. Some time between the 1960s and 1970s Charles Camilleri noted that the “fashion” for three guitars, rather than two, had returned to \textit{ghana} (Camilleri in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:67); however, he does not cite his sources in order to investigate this assertion.
sol, featuring the prim guitar tuned to sol transpurtat and the La guitar in la. For pieces in re, the prim guitar plays re in transpurtat, the La guitar in mi, and for pieces in si moll (B flat) the prim guitar plays si moll akkordat with the La guitar in doh. Pre- and post-Second World War recordings of Cardona confirm that he was adept at playing in a number of tunings and in keys which are not often heard in għana and prejjem today, such as prejjem tal-la and prejjem tas-si moll. Secondly, the La guitar accompaniment style often appears more embellished than we would normally expect of it today, with the inclusion of occasional bass runs (known as nissekondjaw, see section 2.2.3) and more ornamented chord patterns. In some recordings, both Cardona and Azzopardi can at times be heard playing a more embellished top-line accompaniment pattern (transcribed in figure 40 in section 2.2.2) that is rarely heard from the La guitar today, but which is described as common among their generation (Aquilina interview 2013; Joe Cutajar personal communication 2014). In some recordings, such as Għanja: kantata minn Carmena Vella (Odeon A247529), where Azzopardi’s La guitar plays in C major, we can hear fragments of the typical Doh guitar pattern that is still used today, proving that it has existed in some form since at least the early 1930s and was not a post-war invention.41

Although the akkumpanjament patterns in these recordings may well be compromised versions of two discrete La and Doh traditions, what they do clearly reveal is the function of the akkumpanjament. Rather than characterise the La and Doh guitars by their musical patterns, it is better to consider them according to their function within the ensemble. The job of the akkumpanjisti, as I shall detail, is to support the prim kitarrist by providing him with the musical support that he requires at a given moment. The ensemble is, after all, a team: the La and the Doh guitars provide an

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41 Further adding to this evidence, elderly daqqqa of today (and those interviewed in recent decades) recall there having been a number of excellent Doh kitarristi among the pre-war generation.
interlocking accompaniment pattern that support the *prim kitarrist*’s melodic improvisations. Some *kitarristi* identify a division of labour within the ensemble in this respect, whereby the La *kitarrist* supports the Doh *kitarrist* and the Doh *kitarrist* supports the *prim kitarrist* (see Attard 2002; Attard interview 2014). Indeed, *prim kitarristi* are often seen to focus their attention on the Doh *kitarrist* during a performance, fitting their melodies around his patterns.\(^{42}\) The Doh guitar appears as a device – a glue – that embellishes the La guitar and complements the *prim* guitar. If there is no Doh guitar then the *prim kitarrist* will look to the La guitar for this support, whereby the La *kitarrist* may employ some embellished techniques (see section 2.2.3). As it is he who is being supported, it is often the *prim kitarrist* who will ultimately dictate the style of his *akkumpanjament* team. For example, Brincat preferred simple, un-ornamented La and Doh guitar playing – playing *lixx*, “smooth” (Joe Cutajar personal communication 2014) – which complemented his minimalist style and permitted his *prejjem* melodies to shine through. Cardona preferred an accompaniment that rang with layers of melodies, reflecting his florid, ornamented *prim* style. These two *prim kitarristi* will be detailed further in section 2.3 of this chapter. For now, I more closely examine the aesthetics of the *akkumpanjament* and the typical musical patterns that *akkumpanjisti* employ.

### 2.2.1 The role of the *akkumpanjament*

When asked what makes a good *akkumpanjist*, almost every *kitarrist* states that he must, above everything, maintain tempo (*it-temp*). He must be mindful of the different tempi that each *ghannej* will set, as well as that of the *prim kitarrist*: when an *ghannej* is singing he is the one who dictates the tempo, when the *prim kitarrist* is

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\(^{42}\) For one *ghan spirtu pront* performance in which I played the Doh guitar, the *prim kitarrist* asked me to move a little closer to him before we began and instructed me to play loudly.

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playing an interlude it is he who sets the tempo. It is up to the *akkumpanjament* to
follow the lead of each protagonist, yet to also subtly keep both in check. An
*akkumpanjament* team that play together tightly is the beating heart of *ghana*. In *fado*,
Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco ascribes the same function to the viola player, the
accompanying guitarist, whose role as the “backbone of the ensemble” (Castelo-Branco
1994:131) is directly comparable to that of *ghan*a’s *akkumpanjisti*:

This rhythm keeping function of the viola ... which fado instrumentalists refer to
as *dar chão* (grounding), provides a regular rhythmic pulse which allows the
*fadista* [singer] and *guitarrista* [guitarist] a large measure of rhythmic freedom
without losing control. This steady support is one of the qualities most
appreciated in fado accompanists. (Castelo-Branco 1994:139)

Both the *violistas* (guitarists) of *fado* and the *akkumpanjisti* of *ghan*a must maintain a
consonance between the guitarists as an ensemble, and between the ensemble and the
singers. In *fado* this is referred to as “fit” – *violistas* use the term *entendimento*,
“understanding” – an ideal whereby the guitar ensemble “supports, compliments, and
establishes a musical dialogue with the *fadista*” (Castelo-Branco 1994:135).

There is a similar concept in *ghan*a. In one informal session of *ghan*a spirtu
*pront* in which I participated as an *akkumpanjist*, one *ghannej* would always start his
stanzas very slowly compared to the other *ghannejja.* This led the more senior
*akkumpanjist* to raise his eyes to myself and the *prim kitarrist* in the opening seconds of
this particular *ghannej*’s stanza, resetting the tempo by brushing upwards on his strings
two or three times until the tempo of the guitars matched the *ghannej* before returning to

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43 Ideally the *ghannejja* should each maintain a similar tempo to one another. The guitar interludes often
proceed at a slightly increased tempo (see also Herndon 1971:40).
the usual *akkumpanjament* pattern. The following guitar interlude then proceeded at a faster, more suitable pace. Among *ghannejja*, such conservation processes initiated by the guitar ensemble are described as *il-kitarristi imexxik sewwa*, “the guitarists guide you well”, or *jiehu hsiebek*, “looks after you” (Casha 2014d). The *ghannej Żaren Attard il-Bukkaċċ* notes how a good *akkumpanjament* team will cover up the mistakes of *ghannejja*, where amateurs might stumble (Attard, Ż. 2001). Subtle techniques such as emphasising the bass patterns, dynamically altering the tempo and providing emphasised structural markers all assist the *ghannejja* to keep time.

Like an *ghannej*, a *prim kitarrist* may also run away with the tempo. Several *prim kitarristi* past and present have been accused by *ghannejja* and *akkumpanjisti* of playing too fast and not heeding the *akkumpanjament* when they are absorbed in a performance. Kalćidon Vella *ta’ Mustačċa* frequently practices *prejjem* at home on his own, but if his daughter Denise or son Mark are available he will ask them to accompany him. On the one hand, Vella finds playing *prejjem* with no accompaniment “boring”, believing that *prejjem* is ideally a social activity, but on a practical level he also recognises that the accompaniment provides the appropriate tempo grounding that is essential for him to execute his melodies correctly (Vella interview 2012; see also Tanti interview 2013a). Joe Bonello *is-Skuti* describes the *prim kitarrist* as having to “run with the *akkumpanjament*” (Joe Bonello personal communication 2012), insinuating that although the *prim kitarrist* dictates the tempo, he must also be sympathetic to the steadying effect of the *akkumpanjament*. An experienced *akkumpanjist* who can conserve tempo, retain focus and react quickly to cues is a sought-after commodity in the *ghana* community. Pairs of accomplished *akkumpanjisti* who work well together are in constant demand.

Salvu Tanti *il-Kanadiż*, a respected *akkumpanjist*, describes the direction of his focus during a performance:
You have to have your ears wide open to the guitarists, to the lead guitarist and to the singer. No matter what ... When the singer is singing my ears are on his voice, on his tempo. When he stops and the lead guitar goes, then I’m listening to the [prim] guitarist. The akkumpanjament has to follow both. Even if the guitarist makes a mistake while the singing is going, I still ignore the guitarist: my attention is on the singer because, at that time, it’s his turn ... When I’m playing akkumpanjament my attention is on the singer when he sings and on the lead guitarist when he plays ... If you try to catch both, you’re lost! (Tanti interview 2013a)

Tanti’s account reveals how the akkumpanjisti must remain alert and follow the lead of the primary protagonist at each moment of a performance, continuously shifting their focus to provide support where and when required. Especially close attention must be paid to the prim kitarrist, as it is he who initiates structural changes via melodic cues – a particular note or a melodic flourish might indicate that he intends to initiate a kadenza (“coda”), requiring a change to the chord sequence, or that he wishes to remain on a chord a little longer (Bonello interview 2013b; Spagnol interview 2012; Tanti interview 2013a; interview 2013b). Kitarri biss, in which the prim kitarrist frequently initiates structural changes as he sees fit, demands a higher level of concentration from the akkumpanjament in comparison to the more straightforward structure of ghana spiritu pront. The utmost attention is required when accompanying vocal ghana fil-gholi, where the structure can be expanded or contracted at little notice from both the ghannejja and the prim kitarrist.

Like the ghannejja, kitarristi tend to only make eye contact with other daqqafa when there is an issue to be resolved – such as the tempo fluctuations noted in the example above – or when a particularly witty or clever line has been delivered by an
ghannej, temporarily drawing the daqqaqa out of their trance. Structural cues are primarily aural and usually emanate from the ghannejja or the prim kitarrist; mistakes, however, typically require body language to rectify. If he feels his aural cues are not being heeded or that a correction is necessary, the prim kitarrist will use visual cues to communicate with his akkumpanjisti: he might tap his foot, swing his ankle, or gently nod repeatedly in time to initiate increases or decreases of tempo, he may tilt his head to one side to indicate a change of chord (qalep), or flick his head back or raise his eyebrows to cue a kadenza. With his hand held at waist height, an ghannej may subtly beckon up or down to increase or decrease the tempo of the kitarristi, or hold up two fingers to indicate he wishes to initiate the kadenza on the next cycle. All of these cues must be recognised and heeded. A smooth performance by the guitar ensemble hinges on the akkumpanjisti knowing the predilections of the prim kitarrist and being able to follow his lead. Therefore, the more an akkumpanjament team work with one prim kitarrist to learn his aural and physical cues – or better yet, to recall and preempt his preferred tempo and favourite songs patterns – the more slick their ensemble performance appears and the more opportunities they will be afforded to perform publicly.

An akkumpanjist is never depicted as a genius in the ghana tradition as there is little opportunity for him to appear virtuosic – the ultimate aspiration for prim kitarristi and ghannejja. Yet, he may be recognised as a highly capable musician who plays a pivotal role in enabling the genius of particular prim kitarristi to shine through.44 This distinction between prim kitarristi and their akkumpanjisti raises to mind Thomas Turino’s assertion that participation in performance can be divided into “core” and

44 Joe Bonello is-Skuti identifies Indri Brincat il-Pupa’s best recordings as those that feature one of his most established akkumpanjament teams, Guzeppi Mangion ta’ Siegu Hamra and Neriku Camilleri is-Sponos (Bonello interview 2013b). Those akkumpanjisti that elicited Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp’s finest performances are regarded as Pawlu Frendo il-Bożen and Ninu Xibberas il-Moqqli. In Melbourne, Australia, Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba’s most revered performances are those in which he is accompanied by brothers Tony and Frans Camilleri is-Sponos, sons of Neriku Camilleri is-Sponos.
“elaboration” roles (Turino 2008:31-32). Applying this theory to ghana guitar ensembles, the akkumpanjisti take the core role of providing a harmonic bed and rhythm upon which the prim kitarrist and ghannejja can manifest improvised melodic and linguistic elaborations, respectively. For those musicians with core roles (the akkumpanjisti), “artistic freedom and experimentation … are restricted by the responsibility of providing the musical foundation that allows others to participate comfortably” (Turino 2008:32). Therefore, despite the abilities of akkumpanjisti and the respect afforded to them, as they cannot engage in elaborative roles they cannot attain the special status afforded to prim kitarristi.

2.2.2 Typical akkumpanjament patterns

In this section I detail the normative accompaniment patterns that akkumpanjisti use when playing ghana spirtu pront in the key of sol. Other keys and subgenres of ghana and prejjem follow similar structures. There are three sections to an ghana spirtu pront performance: an instrumental introduction (preludju), verses, and codas (kadenzi). A La guitar features in every ghana and prejjem performance; however, a Doh guitar is generally limited to the keys of sol, mi and re. For other keys, two La guitars are usually employed. The alternating tonic-dominant bass ostinato played with the thumb and the interjecting upstroke chords should be played prominently – bir-raffa, “with a lift” – providing the prim kitarrist and the ghannejja with clearly defined markers of where they are in a bar. When the La and Doh akkumpanjament patterns interlock with one another perfectly, Indri Brincat il-Pupa describes this as sounding arlogg, “like clockwork”, or like soldiers marching (Brincat 2005).
Prelude (*il-preludju*)

The introductory section rarely lasts more than five minutes, often less; it is principally a way of easing into a session, establishing its tempo and tonality (Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:69; Ciantar 2000). The *prim kitarrist* can begin a session in one of two ways: he may either play a short traditional song or start immediately with the prelude proper. A ‘song’ may be a traditional melody such as the *nofs ton* or the *għanja tas-suffara*, *għana fil-għoli*, or in rare cases a popular melody. Song patterns are often only heard when a *prim kitarrist* is comfortable with his *akkumpanjament* team, confident that they can follow his lead. After (or if) the song has been performed, a momentary pause will be heard before the *prim kitarrist* initiates the traditional prelude which begins a session. For this, the *akkumpanjament* remain on the dominant-seventh chord until the *prim kitarrist* decides to modulate to the tonic by playing an indicative motivic cue. From this point on, the prelude will take the cyclical eight-bar musical form of the verse (as seen in figure 32). This structure may be repeated for one or more cycles, depending on when it is felt – or indicated – that the *għannejja* are ready to sing.

**Verses**

The *akkumpanjament* pattern for the verse section (the largest portion of an *għana spirtu pront*) is the same whether an *għanej* is singing or the *prim kitarrist* is soloing during his interludes between the *għannejja*’s verses. The *kitarristi* will alternate between A major and E major seventh chords (tonic and dominant seventh) during these stanzas. When the *għannejja* are singing the *prim kitarrist* will adopt a very simple *akkumpanjament* pattern, perhaps filling in pauses between their lines with short melodic flourishes. The accompaniment pattern for the La guitar during an *għana spirtu pront* session in sol is transcribed in figure 32.
The Doh guitar plays a complimentary pattern to the La guitar. In figure 33 I have transposed the Doh guitar pattern up a minor third into C major – the key (and tonic chord shape) that the kitarrist will in fact be playing in due to his transposed tuning. The C# diminished chord in the fourth bar is easy to figure, as it is simply a case of moving the C major chord shape one fret higher. Some kitarristi do not play this C# diminished chord, instead playing this fourth bar as per the third bar.

Coda (kadenza)

Toward the end of a session, typically after the ghannejja have each sung sixteen stanzas, the kadenza will begin. In this section the akkumpanjament will alternate between two different musical structures: one whilst the ghannejja are singing, the ghannej kadenza, and another when the prim kitarrist is improvising, the prejjem kadenza. During the ghannej kadenzi, where the ghannejja are each given a final double-length stanza (sixteen bars) in which to conclude their debate, the guitars
introduce the tonic-seventh (A major seventh) and subdominant (D major) chords to their patterns, as seen in figure 34 (La guitar) and figure 35 (Doh guitar).

Immediately following this sixteen bar ghannej kadenza, the kitarristi will usually play an eight bar verse pattern, as in figures 32 and 33. However, the prim kitarrist may choose to cue a prejjem kadenza, incorporating a distinctive voice-leading descent on the first string of the La guitar which overlays a chord sequence that includes the tonic-seventh (A major seventh) and the subdominant-minor (D minor), as seen in the second
and fourth bars of figure 36, respectively.\textsuperscript{45} Traditionally, the \textit{prejjem kadenza} pattern is only heard after the last \textit{ghannej} has delivered his \textit{kadenza}, whereby the \textit{prejjem kadenza} sequence will be played as many times as the \textit{prim kitarrist} desires (typically twice), before concluding the session on a final strum of the tonic chord. A handful of \textit{prim kitarristi} like to play the \textit{prejjem kadenza} between the \textit{ghannejja kadenzi} too, although this is frowned upon by many \textit{kitarristi} and \textit{ghannejja}.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 36. Prejjem kadenza chord sequence, La guitar.}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 37. Prejjem kadenza chord sequence, Doh guitar.}
\end{center}

\subsection*{2.2.3 Embellished \textit{akkumpanjament} patterns}

A number of idiosyncratic elaborations to these basic patterns are formed by \textit{kitarristi} subtly adjusting their performance technique. \textit{Akkumpanjisti} use their nails or fingertips to pluck the strings rather than a plectrum, permitting some to roll the treble strings to create a more arpeggiated feel to their chords. Some \textit{akkumpanjisti}, such as Tony Camilleri \textit{is-Sponos}, might produce a very subtle syncopation of his bass notes to

\textsuperscript{45} Some \textit{kitarristi} play a Db/D chord instead of D minor in the \textit{prejjem kadenza}. This practice divides opinion, although musically D minor fits more comfortably. The Db/D chord simply requires sliding one’s fingers down a fret in the same shape, whilst D minor is a different fingering.
add a driving force to his accompaniment. When playing La guitar, Salvu Tanti \textit{il-Kanadiż} likes to produce fuller chords by plucking the top four strings, rather than just the top three.

More intricate embellishments to the \textit{akkumpanjament} are found in two forms: bass pattern embellishments (\textit{nissekondjaw}) and harmonic embellishments. These techniques are more carefully applied and are controlled to a large extent by the aesthetic of the \textit{prim kitarrist}, who may or may not appreciate such distractions.\footnote{Prim kitarrist Fredu Cachia \textit{il-Fra} strongly encourages \textit{nissekondjaw} from his \textit{akkumpanjament} team, much to the annoyance of some \textit{għannejja} and other \textit{prim kitarristi}. It has been suggested that his attraction to prominent bass patterns stems from his experience of playing the tuba in brass bands.} \textit{Nissekondjaw} are scalar melodic bass runs that support or “fill in” the space between one chord and another (Tanti interview 2013b).\footnote{A similar technique is employed by the \textit{violistas} in \textit{fado} (see Castelo-Branco 1994:138 for a transcription). In some \textit{prejjem} pieces, such as the \textit{nofs ton}, these bass patterns are a requisite part of the \textit{akkumpanjament}.} The term suggests collaboration – of providing support to the overall harmony of the \textit{akkumpanjament} (Grech interview 2013c). As these bass runs are played on the two or three lowest strings of the guitar some \textit{kitarristi} refer to them as \textit{burduni}, although this is a term more often used to describe the melodic bass patterns of the \textit{prim kitarrist}. So as not to distract the \textit{prim kitarrist} these patterns are usually reduced to two or three notes at a time, but they may be longer. Crucially, these patterns must be played in time, as that is, after all, the key responsibility of the \textit{akkumpanjament} (Tanti interview 2013b). For the La guitar playing a verse pattern, a typical \textit{nissekondjaw} embellishment might be as in figure 38.

![Fig. 38. Nissekondjaw La guitar pattern.](image-url)
The Doh guitar does not have any bass *nissekondjaw* patterns associated with it, likely due to the fact that its lowered tuning, and therefore its reduced string tension, compromises the tone and volume of these frequencies. The Doh guitar’s timbral strength lies in its higher register, and this is where the Doh *kitarrist* manifests his embellishments. The Doh guitar provides melodic ostinato based ornamentations rather than the scalar bass lines of the La guitar’s *nissekondjaw*. Together, the pair create a complementary interlocking pattern. Figure 39 illustrates an embellished Doh guitar pattern that is most effective at a raised tempo.

![Fig. 39. Embellished Doh guitar pattern.](image)

An example of the 1930s *akkumpanjament* style alluded to earlier in this chapter is transcribed in figure 40. It appears prominently in *ix-Xudi u Tonina Sammut (ghanja part 1)* (Odeon A247538a), where it is heard being played by Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp* during the *ghannejja*’s verses. This subtle but effective pattern is alleged by one or two older *kitarristi* to have been popular during this period and is also heard in a number of Cardona’s private recordings made in the 1950s and 1960s.

![Fig. 40. “1930s” La guitar accompaniment style.](image)
Treble rolls, syncopation, ostinatos, *nissekondjaw* and melodic embellishments all add delicate interest to the accompaniment. A good *akkumpanjist* will know when to deploy these devices so that he does not distract from, or clash with, either the *prim*'s melodies or the *ghannejja* (Tanti interview 2013a), and he may stop the embellished style and revert to basic patterns at any point in a session. The *akkumpanjist* must be aware of the total performance: the two *akkumpanisti* must be mindful of supporting one another and, together, the *prim kitarrist* during his improvisations; whilst as a trio ensemble, they must maintain congruity and not draw attention away from the *ghannejja* during their stanzas.

### 2.3 The *prim kitarrist*

An important point raised at the start of this chapter is that whilst an *akkumpanjist* may choose to embellish the norms of the *prejjem* tradition, the *prim kitarrist* is expected to innovate with them. It is the *prim kitarristi* who instigate changes to the tradition through their artistic impulses. Accordingly, a history of *prejjem* is a history of personalities as much as it is one of musical developments. Although the chord sequences, structures, melodies and techniques of the *prejjem* tradition are largely transmitted aurally (by *kitarristi* observing and imitating each other, as will be examined in chapter three), knowledge about significant *kitarristi* is transmitted orally, through stories and anecdotes retold by *daqqaqa*. There is little in the way of a grand narrative for these individuals, only a mythology that is constructed for them from a patchwork of personal interactions. Having these biographic narratives distributed across the musical community effectively binds its members closer together: knowledge is discovered and shared by interacting with informed individuals who act as embodied repositories of information, contributing personalised recollections of people, places and events. Therefore, in this section I consider how these narratives – as they are recalled
by *daqqaqa* today – contextualise the musical developments of the three *prim kitarristi* whom the musical community identify as having most affected how *prejjem* is manifested: Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*, Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* and Żeppi Farrugia ta’ *l-Ahmarr*. By doing so, I endeavour to maintain a balance between top-down and bottom-up analytical approaches. In sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 I outline the history of *prejjem* and the ideals of the *prim kitarrist’s* stylistic approach by reference to the biographies of these three influential *prim kitarristi* and their interactions with one another, and in section 2.3.3 I examine each of their unique approaches to improvising *prejjem* which have become stylistic templates for *prim kitarristi* to the present day.

### 2.3.1 A history of *prejjem*

According to many *daqqaqa* and scholars, the guitar melodies played by *prim kitarristi* today were developed at some point before World War One allegedly through the innovative efforts of Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp* (Fsadni 1993:351; Herndon 1971:102, 105). George Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* suggests that many *prim kitarristi* in the early twentieth century simply imitated *għanja* (the melodies of the singers’ verses) in their guitar interludes, but that Cardona was the first to develop these basic melodies into the intricate improvisations which we know today as *prejjem* (Aquilina interview 2013. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, until the commercial *għana* recording sessions of 1931 there is no firm evidence for the existence of an improvised melodic guitar tradition that accompanied *għana*. Indeed, it is not until the 1950s that *prejjem* as a term is found in common use.48 Until more evidence comes to light, the only narrative for the origin of *prejjem* is the one retold by a handful of *daqqaqa* to myself and to other researchers: Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp* met an Italian guitarist, nicknamed ċiċinu, in a

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48 The titles of guitar instrumental recordings of the early 1930s state “marċ”, “valż” or “duett bil-chitarri” on their labels, rather than “prejjem”.
bar in Gżira. From him, Cardona learned a number of Italian melodies that he subsequently began to use as instrumental flourishes within ghana (Andrew Alamango personal communication 2013; Joe Bonello personal communication 2012; Gatt interview 2013; Spagnol interview 2012). Cardona’s status as the preeminent prim kitarrist of his time combined with the permanence of his recordings has preserved his reputation as the originator of prejjem to the present day.

Cardona was born around 1894 in Qormi, although some believe he was in fact from Ħamrun or Marsa (see Aquilina interview 2013; Manuel Sultana il-Moni and Jimmy Camilleri tal-Fjur in Casha interview 2014b; Cassar Pullicino 1958; Ragonesi and Chircop 1999:99). He began to play the guitar aged ten years old, around 1904 (Cassar Pullicino 1958). Valletta’s twin harbour region in which Cardona appeared to live for most his life (Fredu Cachia personal communication 2014; Sultana in Casha interview 2014b) was at the turn of the twentieth century a particularly fertile setting for his musical development. A labour shortage at the time had drawn a large influx of Italian and Spanish migrant workers to villages in this area to work on the docks and harbour-rebuilding projects (Attard 1983:1; Fiott 1994:75; York 1986:24), adding to the southern European multicultural milieu that was already in existence in this region of Malta. In a 1958 radio recording Cardona recalls how these workers had enjoyed listening to ghana, finding an affinity with ghana fil-ġholi in particular (Cassar Pullicino 1958).49 For much of his life, Cardona is reported to have been a hawker in the twin harbour area – he would, for instance, purchase a catch of fish from Marsa early in the morning to resell in Ħamrun or Qormi during the day (Casha interview 2014b). It is not unreasonable to assume that Cardona became influenced by the multicultural sounds that he encountered in Malta’s cosmopolitan capital and its surrounding areas in the first

49 Unfortunately, in this radio interview Cardona does not speak – his memories are read out by the interviewer, Guzè Cassar Pullicino.
decades of the twentieth century, incorporating fragments of these melodies and rhythms into his own playing.

George Aquilina *Nofis il-Lejl* maintains that, according to his father Karmnu, Cardona had in fact played Italian tunes semi-professionally in his youth before he began to accompany *ghana* (Aquilina interview 2013). Other celebrated *prim kitarristi* contemporary with Cardona – for example, his good friends Ġużeppi Xerri *it-Toto* and Pepi Pulo *ta’ Frawla*, and others such as Ġużeppi Borg *Kekkinu* and ‘iż-Żużu’ – also played in a similar, ornamented “continental” style as he did (a term described by Pepi Pulo *ta’ Frawla* in Casha interview 2014a). Many of these *kitarristi* have in fact been recorded playing Italian tunes. Kalċidon Vella *ta’ Mustaċċa* claims that his own father and grandfather frequently played a variety of European mazurkas, waltzes and marches alongside *prejjem* well into the mid-twentieth century (Vella interview 2012; interview 2013a). It appears *kitarristi* of these earlier generations were well-versed in continental European repertoire, the legacy of which can clearly be heard in *prejjem* today. Cardona’s style was certainly accomplished by the time he was recorded in the early 1930s; however, there is a large period of his early life – the best part of twenty-five years – for which we have no musical record.

Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* (whose biography is presented in chapter one) emerged as a professional *prim kitarrist* in the 1940s, having developed his musical prowess as a teenager during the 1930s. It is claimed by some *daqqaqa* that during this period Brincat had occasionally accompanied Cardona – certainly they remained friendly rivals throughout Cardona’s lifetime (Attard interview 2014; Bonello interview 2013b). However, by the 1950s Brincat was dominating *ghana* with a more minimalist style of playing that contrasted with Cardona’s fast, ornamental approach, rapidly becoming a luminary of the post-war generation of *daqqaqa*. It is to Brincat that many *daqqaqa* of today singularly attribute the guitar’s altered tuning system, many of its performance
techniques and most of prejjem’s core melodies. He is also commonly credited with instigating the kitarri biss style of prejjem and for initiating the practice of imitating the ġhana melodies of popular ġhannejja during prejjem interludes (Manuel Casha personal communication 2014; Herndon 1971:103, 106; Spagnol interview 2012). The validity of these claims is debatable; however, Brincat’s commanding role in prejjem from this period on is undeniable.

Brincat’s rapid ascendance within the ġhana community during the 1950s can be attributed to a number of circumstances and decisive encounters between himself and Cardona. The annual Mnarja folksong competitions provide a suitable arena in which to examine this shift of power. Mnarja, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, is an annual festa celebrated on the 28th and 29th of June in Buskett, near Rabat. In 1953, the Maltese folklorist Ġużè Cassar Pullicino collaborated with the Agrarian Society, which had for a century organised a large agricultural show during the festa, to initiate an official folk song competition into the Mnarja celebrations. ġhana and other traditional forms of music-making had long been a part of this festa, but they had not been formalised into competitions until this year. Brincat and Cardona competed against one another a number of times in the prejjem competitions in the years that followed, whereupon Brincat appears to have won on each occasion (Casha interview 2014a). Prim kitarrist Ray Attard identifies a number of decisive advantages that Brincat had over Cardona at this time (Attard interview 2014). Firstly, in 1953 Brincat was aged 33 and in the prime of his playing, whereas Cardona was nearing 60. Secondly, Brincat’s playing style was exceptionally clear, “like a piano”, compared to Cardona’s delicate, ornamented prejjem. Thirdly, and perhaps most decisively, Brincat used guitars he had built himself that complemented his style of playing. In an outdoor environment such as Mnarja, Brincat’s loud, clear prejjem would have sounded more impressive than Cardona’s, no

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50 For a more detailed history of the Mnarja festa, see Cassar Pullicino 1992:58–63; Leopardi 1956; 1957.
doubt catching the attention of the judges. Attard recalls how proud Brincat was of his first win over Cardona in 1953: “He told everyone that story! To me that emphasises how much he valued that victory over the number one ... Like the coming of the new guard”.

Further to his musical skill, Brincat – despite his relative youth – was highly respected by other daqqaqa, often acting as an intermediary between them and the Mnarja competition organisers. At one competition in the 1950s, the renowned ghannej Ġużeppi Xuereb ix-Xudi was to sing. Xuereb was a “free spirit” whose style of singing was very unpredictable: he was known to push and pull the tempo and even interrupt the prim kitarrist mid-phrase, singing over him (Casha interview 2014a). Brincat reassured the organisers that he would “take care of him”, instructing his akkumpanjament team to follow his lead instead of Xuereb’s, controlling his singing by “guiding him through the tempo” (ibid.). Brincat’s skill at directing and supporting ghannejja, both on and off stage, was as much a factor in his success as was his musical aptitude.

Although singing competitions among ghannejja were not in themselves anything new, the judges of the Mnarja competition (all of whom were middle class intellectuals) introduced and formalised a number of rules of engagement that were quickly incorporated into private ghana sessions: ghannejja were not to deviate from the pre-determined subject of a bout, they were encouraged to use proverbs, metaphors and archaic language, the rhyme structure was to be strictly adhered to, the kadenza was formalised and time limits were introduced (Fsadni 1992; 1993:341; Herndon 130)

51 Brincat’s innovative and progressive attitude toward prejjem which set him apart from Cardona is revealed in a story he related to Manuel Casha (Brincat in Casha interview 2014a). At one Mnarja prejjem competition in the 1950s, Brincat’s ensemble was one of six that participated. When called upon to play, Brincat performed for ten minutes in three different keys – re, sol and doh – seguing smoothly between each. Cardona’s team played only in sol for their ten minutes. Brincat claims that his own ensemble won the trophy on that occasion because the judges were impressed by his unconventional approach.

52 Brincat was the first kitarrist (along with four ghannejja) to have joined the Ghaqda Ghannejja Maltin (Maltese Folk-Song Society), under the auspices of Charles Cassar and Gużé Cassar Pullicino. This collective formed in November 1955 to promote Maltese folk traditions (Times of Malta 1955).
Kitarristi were also afforded a more prominent position at Mnarja, competing for trophies in their own guitar competitions. In the years following the Mnarja competition’s introduction, Cassar Pullicino found the number of kitarristi participating in ghana to have increased and that ghana in general was attracting a broader audience (Cassar Pullicino 1961:68). Placing Mnarja into a broader context, Ranier Fsadni identifies the first folksong competition in 1953 as a watershed moment which ushered in a new era of ghana that reflected the social and economic realities of post-war Malta (Fsadni 1992). Since this period, Fsadni claims that ghana has undergone a “paring down” of its content, contexts and popularity. However, he stresses that ghana’s subsequent formalisation (and semi-professionalisation) has, in fact, allowed it to flourish: prejjem has become more elaborate, language and rhymes are more carefully considered and bouts are more structurally balanced (ibid.). During this period of modification, Cardona’s style may have appeared ‘old fashioned’ and perhaps a little too Italian for post-war Maltese tastes. After the Second World War kitarristi were looking to develop the norms of their tradition and create something new, appearing to ‘pare down’ the continental influence that existed within the prejjem tradition and develop something more progressive and localised. This is the aesthetic that Brincat represented, as did Żeppi Farrugia ta’l-Ahmar.

Born in Ghaxaq in 1929, Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Ahmar is as enigmatic a figure as Cardona. Little is known about his life, yet his influence on a small number of high profile prim kitarristi since the 1950s has been profound. Although he was a slightly younger contemporary of Brincat, Farrugia did not associate with him or with many other kitarristi. He was usually accompanied by his son, Charlie Farrugia, and Karmenu Mifsud iċ-Ċamberlajn, and sometimes by Ċikku Camilleri or a young John Grima tal-Belt. The most characteristic feature of Farrugia’s style was his use of a plectrum – a device that strongly divides opinion among kitarristi even today. A plectrum afforded
him a great deal of volume and a variety of techniques that were otherwise impossible to produce with fingers, resulting in a characteristic melodic style that was highly ornamented and fragmentary. Although Farrugia’s style is, in fact, even more ornamented than Cardona’s, like Brincat he also represented an innovative new approach to prejjem, one that embraced the new technology of the plectrum and exploited its musical potential.

The styles of modern kitarristi – including those half dozen living today that can be deemed kitarristi fin – can all be traced to either Cardona, Brincat or Farrugia. Ray Attard, for instance, describes Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi and Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba’s styles as following Brincat’s; John Saliba ta’ Birżebbija and Kalċidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa as like Farrugia’s; and John Grima tal-Belt like Cardona’s, via the influence of Cardona’s student Pawlu Frendo il-Bożen (Attard interview 2014). Each of these prim kitarristi speed up, slow down, add or remove techniques, and fragment or extend melodies within the aesthetic constraints of these three schools to create their own, unique approach to prejjem. Most of today’s leading prim kitarristi in Malta and Australia cite Brincat as their influence, having either learned directly from him or else reference his style in the way they play: Ray Attard, Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba, Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi and Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ, to name a few. It was viewed as an honour to visit and play with Brincat in his home, particularly in his later life; for those in Australia, it became something of a pilgrimage (Peter Attard personal communication 2014; Bradley 2002:20). Cardona and Farrugia also enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) a similar cult of personality, much in the way that famed ghannejja draw admirers.

Cardona, Brincat and Farrugia each instigated one of the three schools of prejjem that are found today; that is, each had a characteristic aesthetic approach to the interpretation of traditional motifs that subsequent prim kitarristi have followed. Style
in *prejjem* is defined by the manipulation of these core motifs (many of which can be traced to Cardona): how these melodies are ornamented, embellished, centonised and fragmented, and how new core motifs emerge from these processes. Cardona’s approach is characterised by long, flowing melodic patterns embellished with delicate ornamentations. His style is often described by *kitaristi* as very “musical” – a reflection of his continental influences. Brincat removed much of the ornamentation that characterised Cardona’s style, focusing on the essence of each motif. His approach was measured and lyrical, taking great influence from the melodies of *ghannejja*. Farrugia embraced a more destructive approach to style. His was a frenetic juxtaposition of short motivic fragments, greatly embellished with ornamentations, scalar runs, tremolos, pedal string effects and slides.

### 2.3.2 The components of improvisation

Before I examine a number of improvisations which illustrate these three schools of playing, I consider the conceptual ideals behind the production of *prejjem*. I divide these into two categories: first are those ideals that can be identified and discussed by *kitaristi*, and second are those that underlie the tradition but which are rarely – if at all – verbalised.\(^{53}\) In the first category of ideals, the *prim kitarist* is aware of the significance of choosing and applying particular practical processes and techniques to his playing. However, it is his ability to successfully interpret the generally unspoken ideals of the second category that distinguish him as an exceptional

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\(^{53}\) Herndon maintains that the *daqqaqa* she worked with were in fact able to “verbalize so completely about their style” (Herndon 1971:42) that she was able to develop a list of norms *ghannejja* conform to during performances (McLeod and Herndon 1980:148-151). Of these fifty-one “rules”, eighteen deal with structure, twelve govern the use of language, eight specify performance behaviours, nine are musical concerns (tempo, voice range, timbre and tuning) and four detail structural issues relating specifically to the guitar. However, all of these rules relate to my first category of ideals; they do not delve beyond the manifestation of a performance to consider the conceptual issues that underpin the tradition. Furthermore, I maintain that the guitar component conform to a different set of ideals to the *ghannejja*. 

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prim, affording him the opportunity to positively impact the tradition and leave a lasting legacy.

**Part one: practical processes of improvisation**

Any kitarrist wishing to develop his own style must do so within the general constraints of acceptable practice. There are a number of fundamental ideals and norms that a *prim kitarrist* tries to attain in his playing, some of which are expected of him by other *daqqaqa* and his audience while others are personal preferences. A *prim kitarrist* must negotiate these restrictions and be creative within their limits. I discern five core practical issues that *prim kitarristi* consciously recognise and negotiate in their performances: they must fulfil a primarily supportive role during a vocal ghana session, they must remain within a single stylistic school of playing during each performance, they must maintain structural cohesion within their improvisations, they must vary their improvised melodies, and they must choose between fingerstyle or plectrum string plucking techniques.

During a vocal ghana performance, such as *ghana spirtu pront*, the *prim kitarrist* must arrange his improvisations around the *ghannejja* so as not to distract attention away from them. The *prim kitarrist* is free to do as he wishes (within limits) during his own instrumental stanzas, but when an *ghannej* is singing he will typically only play very short melodic fragments in the brief pauses between each of their lines. This is described as “playing low”, as not intruding on the singer’s space (Schembri interview 2013). These melodic fragments or flourishes function to underscore the tempo and provide aural structural markers which help *ghannejja* to confirm where they are in a verse. Christof Jung declares that in *flamenco* it is similarly the lead guitarist’s responsibility to set the rhythm of a piece – “His playing marks the time, supports the song and keeps it on its defined course” – noting how an insensitive virtuosic guitarist
might break a singer’s concentration (Jung 1990:66). This again calls to mind the *fado* aesthetic of “fit” or *entendimento*, where the *guitarrista* and violistas develop a dialogue with the singer to support one another. Like the lead guitarists in *flamenco* and *fado*, the *prim kitarrist* also has a distinct voice that he carefully develops throughout a session. During instrumental stanzas the *prim kitarrist* may invent freely or, as Ray Attard suggests, reflect on the melodic contour of the *ghannej* who has just sung or on the character of his lyrics. He might, for example, improvise aggressive, low-pitched patterns if the *ghannej* has just delivered a biting remark (Attard 2002). This technique bears similarity to *fado*’s “*contracanto*”: literally “counter-song”, *contracanto* is a term used to describe an improvised verse of melodies played by the *guitarrista* that reflects the emotions of the *fadista* (Vernon 1998:13; see also Castelo-Branco 1994:137-138). *Contracanto* suggests the lead guitarist is providing a sympathetic counterbalance to the vocal component of a *fado*, rather than simply presenting an additional voice. This, too, is the ideal for a *prim kitarrist*. The *prim kitarrist* must strike a sensitive balance between lead and support roles, as does the lead *guitarrista* in *fado*: “As the singing commences, the *guitarrista* will subtly alter his position [from a lead melodic voice], becoming a ‘second voice’ behind the vocalist, providing counter-melody and ornamentation” (Vernon 1998:13). When afforded his own verse between those of each *ghannej*, the *prim kitarrist* is given an opportunity to be ‘first voice’ and present his own improvised statements, before retreating when the *ghannej* returns. Being aware of how to shift between these roles and subtly control a performance are crucial skills for a *prim kitarrist*; he will be vocally chastised – and perhaps boycotted – if he cannot fulfil this responsibility.

Another important ideal that is regulated by the musical community is for the *prim kitarrist* to remain in one stylistic school of *prejjem* during a performance (Bonello interview 2012; Schembri interview 2013). Joe Bonello *is-Skuti* describes how a young
Ray Attard would upset more experienced *daqqaqa* when he played in a variety of styles during a single session:

> When Raymond started to play like Kalčidon Vella, he would play ten minutes Kalč, ten minutes Indri [Brincat]. I told him, “You can’t mix those together. You play one or the other” … Indri and Kalč play at a different tempo, a different rhythm … One galloping, one trotting. You can’t mix them together. (Bonello interview 2012)

Vella and Brincat’s styles are quite different. Vella’s playing is fast and ornamented, having emerged from Żeppi Farrugia *ta’ l-Aħmar*’s school, whilst Brincat’s is slower and more deliberate. Whether during a session of *ghanja spirtu pront* or *kitarri biss* a *prim kitarrist*’s improvisations must emulate the coherence of an *ghannej*’s verse, but in melodic statements rather than linguistic ones. To change improvisatory style during a single session is perceived to be as incoherent as an *ghannej* changing topic mid-way through a bout of *ghanja spirtu pront*. This principle further confirms the *prim kitarrist* as a discrete voice in a performance with a distinctive language of his own.

> After one session of *kitarri biss* in which I participated as the *prim kitarrist*, Joe Bonello is-Skuti described my mistakes to me (Bonello interview 2013b). Commenting first on my somewhat naive mix of styles and my lack of a steady tempo, he also stressed the importance of including strategic pauses in the melodies of each stanza. He explained that the *prim kitarrist* must conceive of his instrumental verse as an *ghannej* would: as four lines comprised of two pairs of melodies in ABAB question and answer form (although *ghannejja* sing in ABCB rhyme, melodically the lines relate as ABAB). Bonello hummed a melody, exaggerating a small pause between the first and third lines and a greater pause after the second and fourth lines. Bonello considers it important to
be aware of these pauses, particularly the one midway through the stanza, when composing an improvisation. In practice, these pauses are not always clearly manifested by prim kitarristi, who may conjoin melodic phrases almost seamlessly into one another, but nevertheless a sense of lyrical ebb and flow within and between phrases must be established.

The remaining two ideals are applied largely by the prim kitarrist himself and are not necessarily imposed by the musical community. One aesthetic advocated by a number of kitarristi is to vary one’s improvisations and not repeat melodies (see Herndon and McLeod 1993:152; Tanti interview 2013a). Herndon suggests that “[c]onstant and complete innovation is the ideal of the folk guitarist, and his reputation and status as a guitarist depends almost solely on his ability to approach this ideal” (Herndon 1971:104). If a prim kitarrist does not vary his motifs he will not be criticised by other daqqaga, but he may not be regarded by them (or by himself) as a distinguished prim kitarrist. Musical variation is exercised by joining together melodic fragments (centonisation), contrasting the pitch and timbre of melodies and altering their rhythms and their ornamentation (as will be examined in greater detail below). It is difficult to improvise prejjem innovatively within the accepted constraints of the tradition, but when it is achieved a prim kitarrist may, over time, be deemed a kitarrist fin. Although prim kitarristi do not risk their reputations in performance as much as ghannejja do – where a weak or repeated rhyme or a poor reply can damage their prestige – a number of below-par performances that do not fulfil the ideals outlined so far would nonetheless tarnish a prim kitarrist’s image. A prim kitarrist with a limited melodic vocabulary is, however, respected if he can execute these melodies precisely. As Indri Brincat il-Pupa related, it is better to play a few notes well than many poorly (Attard 2002).
Another personal choice – but one with significant stylistic consequences – is whether the prim kitarrist chooses to strike the strings with his fingernails, bis-swaba, or with a plastic plectrum, bil-pinna. Prim kitarristi traditionally play with their fingernails; akkumpanjisti almost always use the flesh of their fingers, “idooq bil-laham” (Casha 2014d; Galea interview 2014). A plectrum began to be used by some prim kitarristi in the 1950s, most conspicuously by Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Ăhmar and Ġanni Pace l-Artist. It continues to be used by a number of kitarristi today, including Kalčidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa, Frederick Mallia ir-Re and John Saliba ta’ Birżebbuġa. With a plectrum a prim kitarrist gains more control over articulation, intensity, volume and speed, permitting techniques such as tremolos and arpeggios to appear more dramatic; however, it also diminishes much of the delicacy and timbral subtleties that are afforded by fingers. A plectrum does, however, have the benefit of offering consistency to one’s playing. A broken nail (or the claim of one) may absent a kitarrist from several sessions. Brincat used such an excuse when he chose to disconnect himself from the ġhana community for a time due to disagreements (Herndon 1971:293-294). In other instances, genuine damage to a nail has seemingly been evident – one private audio recording of Cardona finds him apologising to its recipient for not having sent a tape sooner as he was unable to play until his broken nail had grown back (Aquilina interview 2013). Cardona, like Brincat, was almost completely reliant on one finger, his index finger, for his right-hand technique (ibid.), although both of their burduni, those melodies played on the lower two or three strings, can often be heard played with the flesh of their thumbs. Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl, a student of Cardona’s, incorporated other fingers into his technique in order to expand the technical and tonal variety of his improvisations. According to his son, George, Aquilina’s melodies were played with upstrokes of the middle finger, tremolos were executed with back and forth movements of the index finger, and his fourth finger was used for downstroke
strumming of chordal phrases (ibid.). He also occasionally used his thumb for burduni patterns and for simple harmonic chord progressions. Aquilina’s exploitation of the timbral effects produced by changing the position at which the string is plucked and the variety, speed and dexterity of his playing provided him with a wide palette of tonal “colour” (ibid.). In the present day, it is acceptable in Malta and Australia to use either method, fingernails or plectrum (or, occasionally, a metal finger-pick), although fingerstyle remains more popular. Moreover, fingerstyle is often fiercely defended by older generations of kitarristi as traditional (see also Cassar Pullicino 1961:68-69). Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba, for example, chastised a young Ray Attard over his use of a plectrum, calling it a “devil thing” and instructed him to throw it away (Attard interview 2014). Ultimately, choosing to play with fingers or a plectrum is a personal choice, but the disregard in which the plectrum is held among many older kitarristi can foster something of a division between generations.

Part two: conceptualising improvisation

The ideals that I have described so far have been practical performance considerations. The materials from which improvisations are manifested and the conceptual processes for doing so are the focus of this section. These more abstract ideals are rarely verbalised by daqqqa, yet it is essential for prim kitarristi to recognise and negotiate them in order to improvise prejjem successfully. Those conversations I conducted in English with Maltese and Maltese-Australian kitarristi often elicited Maltese words or Anglo-Maltese corruptions to describe practical issues concerning the guitar; the more specific or subtle the idea, the less English was used. Furthermore, the deeper I delved into discussing the subtleties of improvisation the more these descriptions became metaphoric or philosophical expressions rather than technical
terms.\textsuperscript{54} I believe this peculiarity is rooted in the informal processes by which \textit{kitarristi} learn \textit{prejjem}, catching nuances of style by observing and imitating other \textit{prim kitarristi} rather than engaging in technical conversations (see chapter three). Chords and their sequences can be named and the position of melodies may be pointed out on the guitar’s fretboard, but the abstract components of improvisation are not explicitly taught and, thus, a technical language has not developed by which to discuss these processes. Therefore, a \textit{prim kitarrist} who is able to successfully interpret and manifest the more subtle (and somewhat covert) ideals which I detail below acquires for himself a reputation as a master \textit{kitarrist}.

To decipher these ideals and to begin to recognise their impact on the process of improvising \textit{prejjem}, we must first consider some fundamental concepts of \textit{prejjem} (following Benson 2003:1-2). What is the nature of a musical work? What processes are being engaged with? Is the \textit{prim kitarrist} a composer? Is what he performs a composition? If so, is there ever a completed composition? If not, then what exactly is being performed? Defining what a \textit{prim kitarrist} is is key to understanding what it is he does. The \textit{kitarrist} is a performer; he performs the music of his tradition. He does not see himself as a composer, nor does he conceive of his tradition as a series of compositions – it is not a canon of \textit{works} (to borrow terminology from Western art music), but rather a set of musical structures within which he can operate. These structures are comprised of a narrow range of possible musical forms, chord sequences and core melodies. To perform within the constraints of the \textit{prejjem} tradition is to improvise melodic patterns that are variations on a number of established melodies. Much of \textit{prejjem}’s historical ‘canon’ of musical structures and motifs is accessible

\textsuperscript{54} Timothy Rice encountered a similar issue when he found his \textit{gaida} teacher unable to explain the subtleties of the instrument’s ornamentation process to him. Eventually, Rice discovered through practical experience that ornamentation was embedded within a conceptual musical framework that did not separate ornaments from melody, and where melody was tied to the physicality of the instrument itself (Rice 1994:86-87; 1995). Much the same can be said for \textit{prejjem}. 
through widely disseminated audio and video recordings. Unlike the printed score of the composed Western classical tradition, where one must often interpret the composer’s intentions principally through the limitations of its written form, recordings of *prejjem* provide an accurate representation of its creator’s intentions. However, these recordings only fix a *performance* of the tradition in time, they do not represent discrete, ideal works to be reproduced – and *kitarristi* understand this. If *prejjem* recordings can be considered a canon, it is a canon of motifs and techniques from which a *prim kitarrist* may glean knowledge and take inspiration to develop his own improvisations, not a canon of established works to imitate. The *prejjem* tradition is one of *performing a process*, re-interpreting core motifs and techniques in the moment of performance.

This is not to say that *prim kitarristi*, as interpreters of the tradition, go unrecognised. Although they are not considered composers in the established sense of the term, *prim kitarristi* each have a characteristic way of improvising within the tradition and many have recognisable melodies or techniques attributed to them. Kevin Bradley confirms this in his own observations:

The most admired *kitarristi* are the innovators; those who introduced the guitar to *ghan*, displayed exceptional skill and inaugurated new, or refined the old, ways of playing. These *kitarristi* are not anonymous tradition bearers, but are in fact well known and respected masters of the *prim*, familiar to, and imitated by, present players (Bradley 2002:19).

Among *flamenco* communities Timothy Mitchell notes a similar recognition of individual contributors to its modern style (Mitchell 1994:1-2; also Banzi 2007:135-143), as do Castelo-Branco and Paul Vernon for *fado*’s innovators (Castelo-Branco 1994:136-138; Vernon 1988:12-13). Recognising and interpreting the heritage
and provenance of particular motifs and techniques is at the heart of prejjem improvisation.

In many ways, prejjem’s canon of motifs bears similarity to the motivic falsetas of flamenco. These short, fixed compositions are also often attributed to a particular flamenco guitar master (as are the contracantos of fado (Castelo-Branco 1994:137-138)), and the manner in which they are approached and applied is comparable to how prim kitarristi deploy prejjem motifs:

All Flamenco guitarists have a traditional library of guitar falsetas, but the experienced guitarist will be able to insert them at will, according to the context of the performance. Eventually he will be able to improvise on them; inserting different melodic or rhythmic fragments, musical ideas, resolution phrases, etc., all the while maintaining the all-important compas and phrasing. (Keyser 1998:83)

According to Julia Banzi, in a depiction that could be applied to prejjem motifs, “the base formula for a falseta is not fixed, but rather is a cluster of possibilities with no single form” from which a performance is developed (Banzi 2007:203-204). In this light, we may compare both falsetas and prejjem to the Persian radif. It too comprises a large canon of motifs that are categorised by musical mode and which are attributable to particular master musicians. Like prejjem, the radif encourages a performer to improvise on these core motifs rather than perform them verbatim. The sequences in which motifs of the radif are played often proceed along established lines that reinforce intrinsic relationships between them, and the melodic contours and ‘essence’ of particular motifs and their host modes must be recognised and respected; however, beyond these constraints a musician is free to improvise on these motifs via a range of
orthodox processes and musical techniques (for more on the Persian tradition see During 2006; Farhat 1990; Zonis 1973).

*Prim kitarristi* improvise in a similar way by developing melodies that are drawn from a body of traditional motifs, some of which are associated with particular keys, subgenres and *prim kitarristi*. Many of these motifs bear associative relationships to each other, one often suggesting another by its sonority or its position on the guitar’s fretboard. Motifs may be played whole or fragmented, inverted, harmonised or stitched together in a variety of ways, but general structures and melodic contours must be recognised and maintained. Herndon describes this form of improvising as “change within stability” (see Herndon 1987), describing *prejjem* as a changing vocabulary of melodic bits, motifs to be improved and evolved into still other motifs ... Within this context, the form of the music remains stable while the substance of the music will rarely be even similar from one performance to another by the same guitarist. (Herndon 1971:105)

In her 1971 thesis, Herndon suggests that most *prim kitarristi*

have a stock of 20 to 30 melody-types which may occur in any order or at any range. Within the space of three or four phrases, a guitarist may use one or as many as six melody types. (Herndon and McLeod 1993:151-152)\(^55\)

\(^{55}\) I have not undertaken a detailed study to establish the number of melodies in the canon, but I would suggest that there are today closer to fifty core melodies which may each be subject to a great variety of improvisational transformation. One Maltese-Australian *prim kitarrist* has a ‘cheat-sheet’ featuring thirty-one melodies, each reduced to its first few notes, which he uses to remind himself of motifs during a session. Some of these are, however, derivatives of others.
Herndon identifies two distinct terms that describe these melody types: *ghanja* and *qalba*. “The *ghanja* [song] represents a faithful reproduction of what a singer does melodically”, whereas the *qalba* (“heart”), consists of elaborate improvisations on these melodies (Herndon 1971:102-103; see also Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:76). Regarding *ghanja*, Herndon declares, “so faithful are these bits of melody to the singer’s melody that Maltese musicians can readily recognize the melodic lines used by famous singers of the past and present”, suggesting that they represent an encyclopaedic canon of *ghannejja’s* melodies (Herndon 1971:101).56 Herndon’s depiction of *ghanja* still stands; however, to the majority of *kitarristi* today “*qalba*” does not infer a specific type of improvisation, rather it is understood as simply the instrumental interlude between vocal stanzas.57 There does not appear to be a term used by *daqqqaq* to specifically describe those guitar melodies that are not derived from vocal *ghanja*; among *kitarristi* they may simply be called “*prejjem*”, or even “the other stuff, not the *ghanja*”. Despite a lack of technical terminology, *kitarristi* recognise fundamental distinctions between the types of melodies they play, both in terms of their musical function and their historic associations. I propose that there are not two categories of motif, as Herndon suggests, but four.

1. *Ghanja*. These are motifs derived from the melodies that are sung by *ghannejja* in each of *ghana*’s subgenres. A *prim kitarrist* will imitate these melodies whole or as fragments. If he is capable, he may even imitate the melodic and rhythmic deviations that are characteristic of specific *ghannejja* of the past and present. Each *ghannej* employs a slightly different melody, but all will follow a similar contour. A

56 See Herndon 1971:70-71 for examples of some *ghannejja’s* characteristic *ghanja* motifs.

57 Modern scholars adopt this more general description for *qalba* (see Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998:76; Ciantar 2000; Coleiro 1994:25; Mifsud Chircop 2004:151, 155). Ciantar offers a translation of *qalba* as “the turning” (Ciantar 2000).
generic *ghanja spirtu pront* melody that may be interpreted by a *prim kitarrist* is presented in figure 41.

![Music notation](image)

*Fig. 41. Ghanja spirtu pront melody in sol.*

2. **Guitar-ghanja.** These motifs are melodies which are associated with the guitar rather than the voice (although they do often follow similar contours as *ghanja*). Guitar-ghanja are often idiomatic to the affordances of the guitar fretboard itself – as such, most are difficult or impossible to replicate with the human voice. To the keen ear of a *dilettant*, some guitar-ghanja are as iconic and uniquely attributable to particular *prim kitarristi* of the past and present as are those *ghanja* melodies that are associated with famed *ghannejja* such as Pawlu Seychell *l-Ghannej* or Salvu Darmanin *ir-Rugel*.

3. **Low-level improvisations.** This category comprises stock motivic material such as cadential patterns (*telgha*), scalar runs and arpeggios. These melodic devices are used to connect motifs or to fill in beats when the *prim kitarrist* does not have a particular motif in mind. However, a cadential figure or an arpeggio or tremolo pattern may well be associated with a particular *prim kitarrist* or his school of playing, even if it cannot quite be categorised as a guitar-ghanja.

4. **Popular melodies.** These are melodies that have been imported relatively recently from outside of the *ghanja* tradition owing to perceived harmonic and melodic compatibilities with *prejjem*. Kalčidon Vella *ta’ Mustaċċa*, for example, sometimes chooses to play fragments of the popular song “Maria Elena” during his *prejjem tas-sol*.
as he identifies musical affinities between the two (Vella interview 2013a). Although these instances are rare and such melodies are usually understood as lighthearted transgressions to the prejjem tradition, it must be remembered that some melodies attributed as guitar-ghanja today were likely popular melodies that were imported from elsewhere – as evidenced by the continental style of prejjem that was performed by earlier generations of prim kitarristi.

Recognising these melody types and the conventions of interpreting and (re-)constructing them in his own improvisations is a vital skill for a prim kitarrist to develop in order to manifest ideal performances of prejjem. These processes are not discussed among kitarristi; rather, a kitarrist’s understanding of the norms of the practice is achieved by immersing himself in the styles of established prim kitarristi and gradually parsing this knowledge through imitation (a core facet of the learning process detailed in chapter three).

2.3.3 Examples of prejjem improvisations

It is not my intention at this point to present a detailed study of the methods of improvising prejjem; space does not permit me to provide example improvisations for all of the keys or song forms of prejjem, nor illustrate how an unembellished ‘proto’ melody is typically improvised upon in each stylistic school. Rather, I wish to present an overview of the prejjem styles of the three prim kitarristi that I have featured in this chapter in order to illustrate each of their innovative aesthetic approaches toward improvisation and how they fundamentally differ from one another.

The stylistic character of a prim kitarrist is determined by his unique aesthetic approach to technique, ornamentation and centonisation. Manifesting these components in a particular way allies a prim kitarrist to a school of playing within which he may carve out a niche for himself. In the category of technique, the prim kitarrist faces
technical decisions such as whether to use his fingernails or a plectrum, how liberally he chooses to approach subtleties of rhythm, and at what pace he is comfortable playing. For ornamentation, he chooses how to embellish his melodies by adding (or subtracting) musical material: tremolos, slides, pedal notes, or changes of dynamics and timbre. Centonisation involves the *prim kitarrist* choosing which melodies to use, the order to present them in, how to fragment them and how to splice them together. Improvising and innovating within the *prejjem* tradition is fundamentally a matter of selecting melodies, or fragments of melodies, from the canonic repertoire of melodic motifs, determining a suitable order to present them in, choosing the ornamentation techniques to embellish and draw out emotion from them, and deliver them within a fixed structural framework. Cardona, Brincat and Farrugia each fashioned particularly unique configurations of these elements, forging three distinct schools of playing that continue to prevail today.

Figure 42 is a transcription of all four of Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*’s improvised stanzas from the 1931 vocal *ghanja* recording *ix-Xudi taht it-tieka* (Odeon A247525a). Although each of these stanzas, labelled Prejjem 1 through Prejjem 4, appear at different points in the song, I have transcribed them above each other so that a better appreciation can be had of their construction relative to one another. Examining these four eight-bar stanzas we find Cardona improvises on four melodic motifs: two guitar-ghanja and two low-level improvisations.

1. The most prominent guitar-ghanja is a motif comprised of a sequence of six short fragments presented as a descending ostinato, seen in bars 1 to 4 of Prejjem 1, Prejjem 2 and Prejjem 4.

2. Another guitar-ghanja appears in two variant forms in bars 1 to 3 and bars 3 to 5 of Prejjem 3.

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58 See track 1 of the accompanying CD for the original recording and track 2 for the *prejjem* extracts.
3. A low-level improvisation comprised of a short, rising scalar pattern is seen in bar 7 of Prejjem 1. It is also seen in variation in bars 5 to 7 of Prejjem 2, bars 7 and 8 of Prejjem 3, and bars 5 and 6 of Prejjem 4.

4. A second low-level improvisation is the scalar cadential motif (a telgha) that descends toward the tonic, visible in bars 8 and 9 of Prejjem 2, Prejjem 3 and Prejjem 4.

In each of these stanzas Cardona improvises on a limited number of motifs. Although his playing is fairly florid, there is little variation and much repetition. These are improvisations which would be viewed as unimaginative by today’s standards if presented in such a manner. Cardona’s 1950s and 1960s recordings reveal a much wider palette of guitar-ganja than his 1930s recordings do – although this may have as much to do with the greater freedom that is afforded prim kitarristi in private sessions of kitarr biss as it may be a reflection of Cardona’s musical development in the decades between these examples. Nevertheless, Cardona’s aesthetic preference for fast, delicate passages is evident in both eras. This proclivity manifests in his choosing guitar-ganja motifs and low-level improvisations more often than the slower, more lyrical ganja motifs. Cardona’s strengths lie in embellishing and ornamenting guitar-ganja through processes of extension, repetition, transposition and rhythmic alteration. His 1950s and 1960s recordings do not, however, display the motivic fragmentation or the more complex centonisation of statements that became common among his younger contemporaries. The improvisations of these later generations of prim kitarristi are more complex than Cardona’s in three key ways. Firstly, prejjem becomes more melodically and rhythmically intricate as prim kitarristi merge more (and smaller) motivic fragments into their melodies. Secondly, the variety of ornamentations and embellishments increase, thanks in part to the introduction and influence of the plectrum. Thirdly, prim kitarristi begin to employ a wider array of performance techniques to vary and contrast timbre and volume.
Fig. 42. Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp prejjem: ‘ix-Xudi taht it-tieka’ (G Xuereb 1931).
Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* became an early exponent of these changes in the 1950s, becoming particularly renowned for his lyrical *ghanja* statements and his innovative approach to melodic fragmentation. Figure 43 is an extract of *prejjem tas-sol* that was recorded by Brincat in 1959 for Rediffusion radio. Brincat paces this stanza carefully, creating smooth conjuncts between each of his three motifs to present one single, flowing melody. In this improvisation, dotted quavers are deployed as a recurring rhythmic theme that provide pause points from which motivic repetition and melodic extensions can develop. For example, in the guitar-*ghanja* of Motif 1 a dotted quaver marks the end of each fragment. In the guitar-*ghanja* of Motif 2 the dotted quavers in bars 5 and 6 provide the same function. In the restatement of this fragment in bars 6 and 7 the dotted quaver is absent, thereby conjoining these two fragments into one continuous melody. Taking a more macroscopic view, Motif 2 has a narrower pitch range in contrast to the large leaps and compass of Motif 1 and Motif 3. The cadential *telgha* of Motif 3, a low-level improvisation, provides an accelerated rhythmic contrast to the previous two motifs.

![Motif 1](image1.png)

![Motif 2](image2.png)

![Motif 3](image3.png)

*Fig. 43. Indri Brincat il-Pupa, ‘Prejjem tas-sol’ (stanza ten) (Brincat 1959).*

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59 See track 3 of the accompanying CD for the original recording and track 4 for *prejjem* extracts.

60 The transcriptions in figures 43 and 44 have been transposed from A major into G major to reflect the piece as performed by Brincat in his raised tuning of *sol transpurtat.*
Brincat’s *ghanja* motifs are just as carefully constructed as the guitar-*ghanja* seen above. Figure 44 is a transcription of another stanza from the same recording. Motif 1 is an *ghanja* to which Brincat appends a melismatic *ghanja kisra* (Motif 2) – a melodic device that an *ghannej* may choose to sing at this point in his stanza. The *kisra* extends the total length of the stanza by one bar. Motif 3 is another *ghanja* (probably considered by Brincat to be a continuation of Motif 1) that is interrupted mid-way for another *ghanja kisra*, Motif 4. Motif 5 is a low-level cadential improvisation. Motifs 4 and 5 could well be considered a single motif in the form of a cadential *telgha*.

![Motif Diagram](image)

*Fig. 44. Indri Brincat il-Pupa prejjem: ‘Prejjem tas-sol’ (stanza two) (Brincat 1959).*

Like Cardona, Žeppi Farrugia *ta’ l-Ahmar*’s fast, decorative style lends itself to guitar-*ghanja* statements rather more than to *ghanja*. Farrugia pushes the guitar to its technical limits, utilising open pedal strings, tremolos, harmonies, slides and rapid ostinatos to embellish his melodies. He employs a great deal of rhythmic freedom in his improvisations, fragmenting motifs into small cells which are then subjected to further internal rhythmic variation. His *prejjem* style is a clear example of a phenomenon in *ghanja* that Maltese composer Charles Camilleri describes as the “atomisation of the

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See track 3 of the accompanying CD for the original recording and track 4 for *prejjem* extracts.
beat”: “In this process the beat falls into self-contained units”, within whose steady metric pulse “accents [shift] beyond the confines of an imagery [sic] barline” (in Bonello 1990:11-13). Camilleri thus depicts how ghana motifs can have internal rhythmic autonomy, yet remain metrically stable. Farrugia’s motifs (or rather the grouping of notes within his motifs) may have an unusual rhythmic pattern of accents on a micro level, yet metrically they remain quite stable. This technique provides a subtle fluidity to Farrugia’s playing which often gives listeners the impression that he is rushing away from or holding back the beat, yet his improvisations will begin and end perfectly in time. All prim kitarristi manifest this phenomenon to an extent, although most (including Cardona and Brincat) are more subtle with its deployment.62

In figure 45 are two sequential stanzas of prejjem tas-sol recorded by Farrugia in the 1970s.63 In this transcription I provide as much detail as possible before further notation would obscure the overall effect of his playing. A number of instances of ‘beat atomisation’ can be found throughout. Farrugia appears to naturally divide each beat into four strokes of the string – easy enough to execute even at speed with a plectrum. The triplet and quintuplet patterns seen in bars 8, 10, 12 and 14 (not the triplets of bar 16, which appear as discrete motivic fragments) appear to be his attempts at controlling the beat by shifting the accent of his strokes. Clearly recognising the importance of the first beat of bars 9, 11, 13 and 15, Farrugia speeds up his playing fractionally in the last beat of each preceding bar in order to reach these downbeats on time and to give them emphasis. The quintuplet pattern in bar 8 is a particularly vivid example of this racing toward the downbeat of bar 9 that also marks the end of the first stanza.

62 Pepi Pulo ta’ Frawla was another prim kitarrist who markedly exhibited this trait. His style would often confound akkumpanjisit until they realised that they needed only to concentrate on maintaining their own tempo, ignoring Pulo’s flourishes (Attard 2002; Joe Cutajar personal communication 2014). Pulo’s flamboyant style relied on a stable akkumpanjament through which he could weave his prejjem.

63 See track 5 of the accompanying CD for the original recording and track 6 for prejjem extracts.
Looking at this example more generally, we find little motivic variation despite a great deal of rhythmic variety. Farrugia’s first stanza (bars 1 to 8) is comprised of one guitar-ghanja motif that is repeated and extended (bars 1 to 7) toward the telgha of bar 8 (beginning just after the slide in the first beat). Shifting from quavers to semiquavers on the second beat of bar 5 gives the impression of acceleration toward the final cadence. Using the open D string as a pedal point (afforded by transpurtat tuning) allows Farrugia to create a chromatic step-wise motion in this ostinato. The tension raised by the harmonic clashing of this pattern is released by the slide in bar 8. The

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64 This transcription has been transposed from B♭ major to G major to reflect the key in which Farrugia is playing due to his altered tuning of sol transpurtat (and to account for fluctuations of the tape’s speed).
second stanza (bars 9 to 17) features a repeated pair of motifs in the form of a question and answer statement – a high-pitched chord followed by a low-level improvisation (bars 9 to 11), repeated twice more with minor variations between bars 11 and 15. The concluding cadential telgha of bar 16 is formed of two very short, repeated melodic fragments in beats one and three followed by a telgha proper in the fourth beat. Often, as particularly evident in the second stanza transcribed here, Farrugia’s guitar-ghanja and his low-level improvisations are difficult to distinguish, so fragmented are his motifs.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to set out the musical components of prejjem and analyse the impact that particular kitarristi have had on shaping and transmitting its stylistic norms. I have shown that developments to prejjem have been intrinsically tied to aesthetic choices made by prominent prim kitarristi, not to anonymous tradition bearers or ‘outsiders’. Through the agency of local kitarristi, changes have been seen to emanate from within the tradition itself rather than imposed upon it from beyond. For instance, whilst many of Cardona’s motifs were derived from Italian and Sicilian melodies, what is more important to kitarristi today is that it was Cardona who chose to incorporate them into ghanja – and that he did so successfully. As John Blacking claims, musical change is not ultimately caused by contact between people and cultures, but is rather brought about by conscious decisions made by individuals reflecting on their experiences of and attitudes toward music and music-making (Blacking 1977:12). Such moments of change are not always distinct occasions, like the Mnarja competition for example; rather, an inclination toward change may be gradually developed over a long period of time (ibid.:12-13). Although on the surface it would appear that the three prim kitarristi I have focussed on in this chapter initiated rapid changes to the prejjem
tradition, in reality their styles were developed over many years. A *prim kitarrist*'s impact can only really be gauged with the benefit of hindsight, by observing the proliferation of their techniques among subsequent generations of *kitarristi*. The compaction of time afforded by examining their recorded performances today, out of historical context, presents us (and modern-day *kitarristi*) with a skewed perception of their development. What we miss in this medium are the incremental *processes* of change and the contextual backdrop in which these changes were made – knowledge that is stored beyond the recordings themselves.

In this respect, Brincat and Farrugia developed their styles in a very different Malta to the one in which Cardona had. The Maltese in the 1940s and 1950s were experiencing a fundamental shift of national identity away from the Italian irredentist impulse of the 1930s toward Maltese nationalism (which would eventually lead to independence in 1964), where value was increasingly being placed on local expressions of indigenous culture (Cassar 2002:221-233). The Mnarja folksong competitions emerged from this milieu, effecting rapid, profound changes to the manifestation of *għana* and *prejjem* by tapping into and advancing notions of local identity, history and culture (see Fsadni 1992). Similarly, a corresponding shift during the same period away from the older ‘continental’ style of playing, which was previously embraced by Cardona and many of his contemporaries, was no doubt a response to these nationalistic impulses. As ethnomusicologists, we are well aware that social changes are reflected in (and effect) musical change – musical change cannot occur in a social vacuum (Blacking 1977:19) – so it is little surprise to note that the intensity with which *għana* and *prejjem* developed in the years immediately following the Second World War coincided with a period of rapid social, political and economic change in Malta.

However, Blacking maintains that musical change cannot be treated as analogous to other kinds of socio-cultural change, going so far as to claim that many
studies of musical change are in fact about *social* change and only “minor variations in style” (ibid.:2). Toward the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, the Maltese were experiencing another political upheaval as intense as that of the 1950s (see Cassar 2002:243-253; Gravina 2012); yet, a parallel musical change did not occur to any great extent during this later period. This would seem at odds with the general view of musical change accompanying social change. However, Blacking suggests that musical *non* -change can signify “a successful adaptation to the threat of anarchy by the retention of essential cultural values” (Blacking 1977:3). Indeed, Anthony Cohen asserts that symbols of the past (of which *ghana* is no doubt one), “mythically infused with timelessness”, are particularly effective symbols of stability in times of social change (Cohen 1998:102). Malta’s increasingly anti-European political stance during the 1980s, specifically the government’s cultural and economic policies to put Malta first, whilst rebellious on an international stage were in fact catalysts for local musical non-change, appearing to encourage *kitarristi* to develop more subtle changes within the existing framework than to establish anything more radical. Many of Malta’s celebrated *kitarristi fin* are found performing during the 1970s and 1980s – Ġużeppi Pace ta’ Ėcoqqa, Ġanni Pace l-Artist, Pinu Borg tal-Lumi, Ġanni Borg il-Grixiu, Karmenu Borg Fantin, Pawlu Frendo il-Boże, Grezzu Ellul ta’ Ĉanċa and Ġużeppi Ellul Taqqala, among others – alongside a number of young *prim kitarristi* beginning their rise to prominence, such as Kalcidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa, John Saliba ta’ Birżebbuġa, John Grima tal-Belt and Steve Ciantar il-Furkett. Innovative techniques and motivic variations are attributed to many of these *prim kitarristi*; however, none developed a style that is considered by *kitarristi* today (with hindsight) as a new school of playing.

The *prejjem* tradition does not appear to have been affected by broad extrinsic social shifts as much as *ghana* more generally has been; *prejjem*’s developments have been directed rather more by particularly significant individuals who practice it. Yet,
changes that are directly attributed to iconic kitarristi are often distorted by the potency of their personality. Cardona is today attributed with forming the practical and aesthetic principles of prejjem in the first decade or two of the twentieth century; however, it may be more accurate to suggest that he was a pioneer of stylistic variations that became influential, specifically the guitar-ghanja, rather than anything more formative. Brincat in particular is attributed by many in the ghana community as having made more contributions to prejjem than he did in reality. Legend suggests that he developed the altered tuning of the guitar ensemble, established the kitarri biss form, increased the number of keys and invented a number of new ghanja and guitar-ghanja. Some of these claims have some truth in them, whilst other are plainly incorrect. Brincat’s fame and influence date back to the 1950s, when he became the embodied focus of a convergence of historical, political and musical circumstances that afforded him great acclaim from within the ghana community and beyond: his prize-winning participation in the Mnarja folksong competitions from 1953, his frequent appearances on radio and in private recordings from the late 1950s, his good relationships with ghannejja, his willingness to play with anyone and his unique ability to build guitars to his own specifications. Furthermore, his youth, good looks (his nickname il-Pupa translates as “the doll”) and his undeniable virtuosity and creativity on the guitar all contributed to his position as a powerful figurehead of ghana after the Second World War.

Yet, even someone of Brincat’s stature can fall foul of the tradition. By the late 1960s Brincat’s musical innovations were extending to prejjem’s form and structure. In Herndon’s assessment of Brincat’s style at the time,

[his] strophe became less clear, melodic content became almost skeletal and traditional chord lines began to be questioned ... Shifts from major to minor
occurred within a single performance, triple meters appeared and exaggerated accelerandos developed. (Herndon and McLeod 1993:152-154)

What is revealing about these digressions is Herndon’s report of the ghana community’s reaction of ostracising him, in part, because of these developments. When he rejoined the community, Brincat returned to playing more orthodox prejjem forms which did not push the tradition so far from its roots (ibid.:153-154, 172-174). Brincat met with resistance from the ghana community when he attempted to alter the form of prejjem, not by his innovating with its melodic components (ibid.:154). This raises the question of where the distinction lies for daqqaqa between change of their musical system and innovative variation within that system (after Blacking 1977:15-19). In this instance, Brincat’s divergence reveals to us that a condition of prejjem is to maintain its fundamental structures, upon which one may freely innovate techniques and melodies. Thus, as Herndon notes, prejjem can be seen to permit change on two levels: structural and surface. The structural material – prejjem’s forms, patterns and chord sequences, represented by the akkumpanjament – change very slowly, if at all; whereas the surface material – the improvised guitar melodies, represented by the prim – is in a constant state of flux due to its inherently improvisatory nature (see Herndon 1971:165). Forty years on from Herndon’s study, her hypothesis of a “kaleidoscope of change”, a model of layers each moving at different speeds, holds true for prejjem (ibid.:166).

Changes at the structural level are evidently more disruptive and are relatively rare (the Mnarja competition rules being an obvious example). For instance, more song form variations have been abandoned by daqqaqa than have been incorporated into the tradition. Musical non-change is a characteristic diffused throughout prejjem and is particularly notable in the akkumpanjament style norms that were described in section 2.2. The akkumpanjament’s chord sequences, performance techniques, song structures
and approach to embellishing patterns have undergone almost no change since the 1950s. Non-change (or very limited change) is also found in the canon of motifs that are used by prim kitarristi as the basis for their improvisations. Yet, as Bruno Nettl asserts, every musical culture exhibits a certain amount of constant change as one of its core features (Nettl 2005:279). For prejjem, the opportunity to innovate lies within the prim component, specifically in the techniques that the prim kitarrist may use to improvise on the underlying motivic canon, as detailed in section 2.3.3. The stability and non-change represented by the akkumpanjament is the framework upon which innovation at surface level may occur through the prim kitarrist’s improvisations.

The transmission of musical style is necessarily a condition of the acceptance of musical change (or, at least, of Blacking’s “innovative variation” (Blacking 1977:15)) – if a certain characteristic is not accepted, it is unlikely to be performed often or be recorded (and circulated). Owing to the exponential frequency by which ghana performances have been recorded over the past few decades and the continued circulation of old material, prejjem is constantly being (re)created through the stimulus of rediscovery rather than reinvention; new melodies are often old melodies revisited. Ray Attard recalls learning one particular prelude motif from an old cassette recording of Brincat performing on the radio. Attard subsequently performed this melody so frequently in his own prejjem that it became associated with him and not Brincat (Attard interview 2014). It is quite feasible that Attard’s cassette copy is the only evidence of a melody that Brincat may have played just a handful of times. Such is the power of fixing improvised performances on a permanent medium that a fleeting improvised passage can become a core motif in a later kitarrist’s melodic repertoire.

The 1950s and 1960s is considered by daqqaqa as a high point of ghana and prejjem, being a period in which Cardona’s, Brincat’s and Farrugia’s careers overlapped and many of ghana’s most revered kitarristi were flourishing in Malta and its diaspora.
Budding *prim kitarristi* in the present day look to recordings from this era in particular for material with which to develop their own styles. It is unlikely that the *prejjem* tradition as it stands today will enable the development of a new stylistic school of playing alongside those of Cardona, Brincat and Farrugia, as there are no more radical developments that can feasibly be made to innovation at *prejjem*’s surface level. What is, however, possible within the realms of the existing aesthetic of the tradition is a rediscovery, reincorporation and redevelopment of the older structures that have all but disappeared – the continental forms and melodies that are still known among a handful of older *kitarristi* today and which can also be found in recordings. As I reveal in chapter three, using recordings of *prejjem* to learn legacy styles has been a legitimate practice for over fifty years. These recordings may provide the key to future developments in *prejjem*. 
CHAPTER THREE

Transmitting musical knowledge:
a model for learning prejjem
In this chapter I examine the methods kitarristi use to learn prejjem, detailing the different environments, relationships and modes of learning that facilitate the transmission of musical knowledge within the ghana community. My study of these methods builds primarily on the social-situational field of learning theory (one of four orientations posited in education literature alongside behaviourist, cognitivist and humanist approaches (Merriam and Caffarella 1991:138; Smith 2003; also Wenger 2009:216-217)), which takes socialisation, participation and conversation as manifestations of learning (Smith 2009). Applying theories of situated learning, informal learning, communities of practice and apprenticeships to prejjem, I investigate how learning occurs at the nexus of three interdependent strands of social interactivity: the relationships between those who have musical knowledge and those who wish to learn it, the methods by which specific material is transmitted between these individuals, and the social settings within which such learning occurs. These factors determine what material is learned, from whom, and in what context.

From the outset of this chapter I wish to underline a distinction between learning and teaching: learning – the acquisition of knowledge – is the fundamental activity that is being engaged with by student kitarristi; however, knowledge can be learned without being taught, and it may be acquired without being sought. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that as the motivations and goals of teachers and students are not always uniform, teaching and learning should each be given independent status as analytic concepts (Lave and Wenger 1991:113-114). In their study of community-based situational learning they place greater attention on the learner’s intentions, focusing on how the structures of social practice (rather than the structures of pedagogy) facilitates their learning (ibid.). Lave and Wenger contend that learning should not be considered as a discrete activity, but “must be understood with respect to a practice as a whole, with its multiplicity of relations – both within the community and with the world at
large” (ibid.:114). The model for learning that I propose for *prejjem* encompasses an individual’s total immersion in this community, examining the relationships that he negotiates with those within it as he develops musical ability alongside sociability. *Prejjem* (and *ghana* more generally) is a practice-based activity about which knowledge is learned by actively engaging with its community of practitioners. There is very little in the way of formal pedagogy: *kitarristi* are not taught knowledge; they seek it.

Learning *prejjem* is a continuous, reflexive and largely self-directed activity, within which I discern five stages of development that a *kitarrist* moves through: (1) the acquisition of musical norms and associated behaviours, (2) the learning of basic techniques and musical patterns, (3) the development of advanced ability and taste, (4) the initial presentation of this knowledge at the start of his career, and (5) the continuing presentation of it as his career develops. These five stages are divided into two broad categories of acquisition/learning (1–3) and presentation (4–5), each of which involves a particular set of learning and evaluative processes. Stages one and two of my model are where the base knowledge of *ghana*’s social and musical norms are obtained by *prim* and *akkumpanjament* students through what I discern as public and semi-public ‘spheres of learning’ – domains of learning determined by certain types of relationships being enacted in particular social settings. During the third stage of my model, a divergence of learning practices begin to manifest between *prim kitarristi* and *akkumpanjisti*. The *prim kitarrist* is here uniquely afforded a private sphere of learning in which he can develop his ability in a liminal space away from the gaze of the wider community. This median stage in my model also marks a transitional shift toward the presentational – yet still reflexive – learning of stages four and five. During these latter two stages, the now competent *kitarrist* independently evaluates and modifies his playing according to feedback he receives from the *ghana* community.
In this chapter I begin by reviewing social-situational learning theories before applying them to ghana and prejjem. I then detail a five-stage model of learning and evaluation that details a kitarrist’s lifelong musical development through processes of acquisition, learning and presentation. Within this structure I identify three spheres of public, semi-public and private learning – analogous to situated learning practices – which are employed by student kitarristi to gain knowledge in specific aspects of the prejjem tradition. I pay particular attention to the role of recordings in the learning process, examining how the liminal space which they afford breaks from the kind of face-to-face situational learning that permeates the rest of my learning model.

3.1 Social environments of learning

In a survey of worldwide ethnomusicological monographs, Timothy Rice draws attention to two fundamental approaches to learning music: active teaching and informal learning (Rice 2003:72-78). Rice discerns active teaching taking place in formal, institutionalised settings, “such as apprenticeships, schools and conservatories, private music lessons, and rehearsals for rituals, ceremonies, festivals, concerts, competitions, and the performance of new compositions” (ibid.:72). Such formal training implies there is a dedicated time and space set aside for musical instruction – it is planned, purposeful education (Rogers 2004, after Coombs and Ahmed 1974:8). Informal learning, on the other hand, entails observation and self-tutoring occurring within the context of musical socialisation (Rice 2003:72-74). Rice claims that informal learning often precedes more formalised musical training: “that is, the basic concepts and performance style underlying the repertoire are learned in this way before adult intervention and teaching begin” (ibid.:74). However, I maintain that informal learning techniques dominate throughout the musical life of a kitarrist, and that some of the
contexts of learning available to him, such as apprenticeships, do not necessarily implicate formal teaching methods.

Learning prejjem, like Rice’s account of learning the Bulgarian bagpipes, centres largely on observation and imitation in a visual-aural-tactile process (ibid.:77). In the prejjem tradition there is no formal education system of schools or classroom environments, a curriculum, or teachers; rather, musical knowledge is extracted from experienced musicians largely through conversation, observation and imitation. This is knowledge that is “learned but not taught” (ibid.). Advice may be freely given to a student, techniques explained and specific questions answered, but there is no concept of a structured lesson. As the onus for learning is on the student and not the teacher, the student is presented with a great deal of autonomy to acquire the knowledge that he is most attracted to and in an order which suits him. Patricia Shehan Campbell considers this issue in terms of intent and responsibility: in formal settings it is the teacher who is responsible for imparting knowledge, whilst informal learning holds the learner responsible for obtaining information (Campbell 1991:81). This suggests that informal learning is guided by curiosity about specific knowledge that the learner wishes to obtain. This notion of acquiring knowledge relevant to one’s personal and social needs echoes the definition of informal learning given by Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed as a

lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of
families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films and television. (Coombs and Ahmed 1974:8)

Informal methods embed learning within a social-situational context: knowledge is obtained via relationships negotiated (or objects interacted with) in contextualised settings. Mark Smith notes how “[d]ifferent settings will offer a novel mix of resources and opportunities for learning and will have contrasting expectations associated with them” (Smith 2008), suggesting that particular knowledge is shared when stimulated by particular settings. However, it is the processes and experiences that are being engaged with in each setting that determine what (and how) knowledge is transferred (ibid.).

R. P. McDermott describes informal learning as stimulated to a great extent through conversation in context:

Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organise a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (McDermott 1999:16)

As informal processes are largely driven by conversation (Jeffs and Smith 2005:23; 2012; Smith 2008), the transmission of knowledge may occur at any time or place that takes on relevancy. As such, these transmissions are often characterised by a lack of

\[\text{\footnotesize 65 Coombs and Ahmed in fact assign this definition to informal education; however, in revisiting and critiquing their pioneering work, Alan Rogers determines their definition rather to match what is today understood as informal learning (Rogers 2004).} \]
linear, compounding development (as is often found in formal learning methods). This characteristic has led informal learning to be described as unorganised and unsystematic (Coombs and Ahmed 1974:8). However, that is not to say there is not a system; rather that a system based in conversation progresses as erratically or as coherently as those conversations permit. In an informally learned tradition such as prejjem, it is largely the kitarrist’s responsibility to recognise relevant fragments of musical knowledge in order to learn them; he has to know which questions to ask, otherwise knowledge will not be forthcoming.

In social-situational learning practices a student learns how to be a musician whilst simultaneously developing his identity within the community. As Lave and Wenger depict in their pioneering work on situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991, summarised below by Mark Smith),

Learning involves participation in a community of practice ... Initially people have to join communities and learn at the periphery. As they become more competent they move more to the ‘centre’ of the particular community. Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of social participation. The nature of the situation impacts significantly on the process. (Smith 1999, italics in original)

As Lave and Wenger detail, “learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person” (Lave and Wenger 1991:53). The development of one’s sociability in musical and extra-musical communities – what

66 John Blacking found the informal practices of musical instruction among Venda children often led to complex musical pieces being learned before simple ones. The pieces one encountered most frequently in social contexts were learned regardless of their complexity (Blacking 1995:29).
Patricia Shehan Campbell calls the process of growing into music (Campbell 2001:222) – is often concomitant with the broader trajectory of an individual learning the values, roles and sociability of his society. Alan Merriam identifies this as enculturation, “the process by which the individual learns his culture” throughout his life via the socialisation process (Merriam 1964:146). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Francis Bebey identifies the sociability of children’s musical games as “a form of training which prepares them to participate in all areas of adult activity” (Bebey 1975:8). For Joseph Nketa, music-making in Africa is a communal activity that offers its participants “an opportunity for sharing in creative experience, for participating in music as a form of community experience, and for using music as an avenue for the expression of group sentiments” (Nketa 1988:22).

Similarly, Rice claims sociability as a central aspect of the learning process for Bulgarian instrumental and vocal traditions, identifying how “closeness, either in social or geographical space, greased the transmission of repertoire” (Rice 1994:49). In his study, the initial stimulation for a young girl to learn Bulgarian women’s songs was found in the context of the home alongside other female relatives. For boys, the initial learning context was wider: in addition to family and home environments, their learning also occurred at fairs, in taverns, and in fields whilst herding animals (ibid.:55). Here, the first steps toward becoming a musician – in broad terms – coincides with the development of one’s identity from an early age by interacting with networks of individuals in a variety of everyday contexts. Indeed, Paul Berliner asserts that it is within the soundscape of the home and its environs that children develop their early musical sensibilities, learning their culture’s definition of music and developing expectations of what music ought to be. Similarly, within the confines of their music community or music culture, children learn the aesthetic
boundaries that define differing realms of performance, forming impressions of the most basic attributes of musicianship. (Berliner 1994:22)

This absorption of musical knowledge, of “osmosis” (ibid.; Wade 2004:17), continues throughout the life of an individual. The context of learning naturally shifts from a domestic environment to those patronised by a musical community, suggesting a simultaneous development of identity – of ‘becoming’ in a community. Performing music, whether engaged in as a child or as an adult, is the result of an individual positioning him/herself strategically – consciously or unconsciously – within a Geertzian web of relationships which provide access to the musical tradition.

The ghana community is just such a web of dependent relationships, composed of ghanneija, kitarristi, dilettanti, oganajžers and audience members. To paraphrase Burt Feintuch, a classic definition of a musical community is that of a dense web of social relationships that go beyond the single commonality of the “special event” that is the performance itself (Feintuch 2001:149-150).\(^{67}\) The ghana community concentrates around (and exists because of) a highly social performance activity that requires deep investment and participation from a community of musicians and facilitators to produce it, and a knowledgeable audience to present it to.\(^{68}\) Within this ghana community are nested ‘communities of practice’, smaller groups of individuals who share a passion for a particular component activity of the tradition that they participate in and who learn to perform it better by interacting with one another regularly. For Etienne Wenger, members of a community of practice (1) have their identity defined by a shared domain

\(^{67}\) However, in his article Feintuch elucidates the problems of such a narrow interpretation of community by considering the “special events” of more casual musical get-togethers, whose participants he identifies as performing a longing for community (Feintuch 2001).

\(^{68}\) I will round out a more complete portrait of the ghana community in chapter four of this thesis. In this present chapter, I consider the methods of learning and transmitting musical material among individuals and groups of individuals within the kitarrist community, whereas chapter four considers the ghana community and its constituent relationships more broadly.
of interest, (2) pursue this interest through joint activities and discussions which enable them to learn from each other, and (3) develop a shared repertoire of resources in order to practice their interest (Wenger 2013:1-2; also 1998).

**Toward a model of the ghana community**

Members of the ghana community are bound together by mutual engagement with ghana as a social and musical performance activity in a closed system of production, facilitation and consumption. Nested within the ghana community are a number of groups of individuals who play particular roles in manifesting a performance. Each of these communities of practice retain knowledge that is pertinent to their role within the practice of ghana, along with specific methods of transmitting this knowledge between its members. Yet, these are not discrete, disconnected communities: each necessarily knows of the others’ practices in order to meaningfully participate in performances together. The ghannejja do not need to identify guitar chords or understand the details of melodic improvisation in order to execute or improve their vocal practice. They do, however, require knowledge of kitarristi’s melodic and structural cues that are relevant to directing their singing. The kitarristi have no need to keep up to date with the duels between spirtu pront singers in order to execute their part of an ghana performance, but some nevertheless follow such encounters in order to engage more fully with the ghana community. Those kitarristi who wish to know more about ghannejja, or vice versa, can do so because they are all part of the same broad ghana community that converges during a performance.

In figure 46 I model the ghana community in terms of activity, rendering four discrete but overlapping communities of practice (ghannejja, kitarristi, dilettanti and oganajzers) nested within a general audience. This audience cannot be described as a community of practice as it is a loose communal arrangement of individuals who do not
directly manifest or facilitate a musical component of performance. However, the audience can have a great deal of power in directing a performance, as will be examined in chapter four of this thesis.

Fig. 46. Model of the ghana community as a composite of communities of practice.

Members of the kitarrist community of practice partake in activities that include performing *prejjem* and sharing knowledge about the guitar, its music and its players. The activities of the ghannej community of practice centre on debating issues pertinent to singing, such as language and history, and recounting past and present interactions between ghannejja. The dilettant community of practice is comprised of individuals with an interest in the final performance of ghana, who often prefer either the guitar or vocal component of ghana and will support particular *daqqaqa* from these
communities. *Dilettanti* make, collect and share recordings and possess detailed knowledge of *daqqaqa* and historical events pertaining to the *ghana* community. The *oganajżer* community of practice is comprised of venue owners (public bars and clubs, and private homes and garages) or promoters with an interest in *ghana* who facilitate performances in practical ways. Members of the *ghannej* and *kitarrist* communities of practice are primarily concerned with manifesting musical performances, whilst members of the *dilettant* and *oganajżer* communities of practice are principally concerned with facilitating and consuming a musical performance.

However, as my diagram suggests, these communities of practice are not discrete entities. These overlapping communities represent groups of individuals who share a primary interest in manifesting a particular component of the *ghana* tradition: an *oganajżer* may also be a *dilettant*, and a *kitarrist* might also be an *ghannej*. Members of the *ghana* community are divided by specialism, but they are united by their participation in the same performance activity. There is in fact a great deal of communication and interaction between members of these communities of practice. My diagram simplifies a very complex network of relationships that span the *ghana* community and beyond, but it is suitable for the present purpose. It is useful here to briefly examine the constitution of the *ghana* community more generally before I refocus on the *kitarrist* community of practice. When I make statements about the *kitarrist* community of practice from this point on, I am referring specifically to those individuals who are directly involved in the community that take the guitar and *prejjem* as its focus; references to the *ghana* community are broader statements which apply equally to all of the communities of practice.
Interacting in the ghana community

Ghana is a heightened performance of everyday sociability enacted by close-knit communities of individuals in convivial environments such as bars, clubs and homes. As these performance activities often manifest at a nexus of social and familial interactions, engaging with the ghana community – or choosing to absent oneself from it – can have quite far-reaching effects on the sociability and status of the individual, both within the ghana community and in related social, domestic or work communities s/he is also a member of. According to Ronald Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino, this deeply interconnected social structure is endemic of Malta’s small scale “microstate society”, whose populace “grow up within an interdependent network where each person figures many times over” (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994:16):

Nearly every social relationship serves a variety of interests, and many roles are played by relatively few individuals. The same persons are thus brought into contact over and over again in various activities, because each operates and meets the other on the basis of different roles held in the context of different role-sets; decisions and choices are therefore influenced by the relationships which individuals establish and cultivate with others in a repertoire of diverse social settings. (ibid.)

However, that is not to say that the roles played by daqqqa in other communities in which they engage beyond ghana are necessarily transferred between them. Relationships that simultaneously figure outside of the ghana community in other contexts – such as with work colleagues, neighbours, family friends, or kin who are also members of the ghana community – and their inherent social hierarchies certainly impact the relationships negotiated within the ghana community of practice, but they
are nevertheless considered distinct. As Anthony Cohen suggests, individuals in small scale societies

may well encounter each other more frequently, more intensively and over a wider range of activities than is the case in more anonymous large-scale milieux. But that is not to say that people’s knowledge of ‘the person’ overrides their perception of the distinctive activities (or ‘roles’) in which the person is engaged. (Cohen 1998:29)

An ghannej who happens to be a policeman cannot expect his spirtu pront opponents to soften their blows. Social relationships in Malta and its diasporic communities are complex, multifaceted and ever-evolving organisms that react to a multitude of stimuli. However, the types of relationships within a community remain stable, and it is these structural nodes that I focus on. It is the individual kitarrist who chooses which of these relationships to form or dissolve, which ones to stress and which to disregard.

Ultimately, the success or otherwise of a kitarrist can be attributed in large part to his ability to ingratiate himself among his peers, including those older musicians in the ghana community. As Rice points out with reference to Bulgaria,

a young musician’s ability to get along with, respect, and gain the friendship of older people ... [is] a key social factor in becoming a good musician. Once the older men ... recognized his talent, they were strongly encouraging and provided the social context in which he perfected his skills. (Rice 1994:51)

The ghana bar is a particularly egalitarian environment in this respect (Fsadni 1993:346), binding together a broad age range of patrons and musicians in a common
activity. One ensemble in Malta features a *prim kitarrist* in his mid-teens, one
*akkumpanjist* in his late fifties and the other in his eighties. It is precisely this kind of
interaction between individuals from different social backgrounds, age groups and home
towns that facilitates the transmission of the *prejjem* tradition.

In her thesis on the politics of folksinging in Malta, Marcia Herndon presents a
useful diagram (reproduced in figure 47) that depicts the social relationships between a
particular *ghannej*, Salvu Darmanin *ir-Ragel (ir-Rugel)*, and those individuals in the
*ghana* community with whom he associates (what Herndon calls his “segment”). This
model reveals the interconnectedness of *ghana* communities of practice as well as the
types of relationships that constitute them. Placing Darmanin at its centre, this model
capsulates in ever-widening degrees of closeness his kin (nephews Fredu Abela *il-
Bamboċċu* and Renauld Abela *Renauld*), close friends (Johnny and Angelu), old friends
(with specific mention of the *ghannej* Żaren Mifsud ta’ *Vestru*) and lesser singers, and
supporters (*dilettanti*). A notable boundary encloses kin and close friends from
increasingly more distant relationships. Conceiving of relationships in this way, as
nested layers of relative closeness, is insightful as it reveals how relationship categories
determine allegiances within the community. Darmanin maintains increasingly distant
relationships with those positioned furthest from him in this diagram.
In the communities of practice diagram of figure 46 I had divided the *ghan* community’s members in terms of their activities; however, these communities of practice are formed of relationships – specifically *types* of relationships which facilitate and manifest certain behaviours and learning activities. In figure 48 I take influence from Herndon’s above diagram to illustrate how relationships can be similarly organised in terms of relative closeness for a student *kitarrist* learning the *prejjem* tradition within his community of practice. This model helps to illuminate the contextual social framework within which *kitarristi* learn the *prejjem* tradition as a socio-musical whole.
Fig. 48. Model of nested relationships within the kitarrist community of practice.

1. Student. At the ‘centre’ of the kitarrist community of practice there is the kitarrist, whom I shall refer to in this chapter as the student.

2. Kin musicians. The student may enjoy particularly close relationships with family members who are kitarristi; however, family ties may straddle a number of communities of practice and so provide the student with intimate access to a variety of other networks. The relationship between the student and kin musicians is negotiated in a variety of physical environments: in public (in bars and other public events), in semi-public (gatherings in quiet venues or homes) and in private (at home).

3. Close kitarristi. The student will negotiate a different type of relationship with other kitarristi he is in frequent contact with. As with kin musicians, this relationship can be negotiated in a similar range of public, semi-public and private environments.
This may involve the student spending time playing with other kitarristi in each other’s homes or at semi-public gatherings in bars, perhaps listening to recordings, asking advice on how to figure certain chords or melodies. These relationships are forged from a shared interest in musical performance, rather than the more varied (and domestic) concerns of kin relationships.69

A dashed circle marks the boundary between close and distant relationships. This division fundamentally affects the methods of transmission that are available to the student from those individuals within or beyond it.

4. Distant kitarristi. This relationship is between the student and those kitarristi who either do not regularly attend the same venues he does, or with whom he has not struck up a more familiar relationship. He may regularly engage with these individuals during public performances, but they do not maintain a strong friendship outside of performance contexts. However, a student might learn a great deal from these individuals: an established kitarrist may not wish to share his knowledge, but he might nevertheless be closely observed and studied by a student without his consent.

5. Ghannejja and wider ghana community. This category encompasses relationships that are negotiated at public events between the student and all of the other individuals within the ghana community, including its other communities of practice and its general audience. This is not to say that the student may not be close to ghannejja, dilettanti, oganajżers or audience members, but that the student is not likely to receive musical instruction from them.

Reflecting Herndon’s illustration, my model reveals the relative closeness between a student and other members of his community of practice and with the wider

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69 Jon Mitchell notes how individuals in even the smallest and most intimate Maltese social grouping, the klikka, do not discuss personal or private matters with one another: “Rather, problems of a personal nature should be discussed with either family members or a priest. Under no circumstances should they be made public amongst a group of male friends” (Mitchell 2002:83). Although friends may be close, traditional social patterns dictate that distance should be maintained in certain matters.
ghana community. It locates the overlap of his relationships with individuals in other communities of practice both at the fringe of the kitarrist community of practice (in the outermost circle) and also, potentially, in the very close circle of kin musicians. It also highlights the situated nature of learning prejjem, whereby relationships that are formed and/or defined through the performance of music in particular contexts enables specific material to be transmitted. The dashed boundary in my model marks a number of important distinctions. Enclosed within it are those relationships that can be negotiated at private, semi-public and public events, whereas those relationships beyond it are only negotiated at public events. Private and semi-public events tend to entail more active, bi-directional pedagogical modes of transmission than public events do, as convivial relationships borne from social closeness encourage interaction and conversation. Public events tend to offer fewer opportunities for a student kitarrist to engage with his peers, resulting in a more uni-directional learning process via observation. To an extent, this boundary also marks a division between the realms of learning and of presentation; those individuals within the boundary are likely to actively assist the student in acquiring the tradition, whereas those outside of it are more likely to evaluate his presentation. Of course, evaluation also occurs in the inner circles within the boundary – and learning is often passively facilitated from those outside of this boundary, such as through recordings or distant observation – but, ultimately, it is the presentation of the kitarrist within the space of public ghana that confirms his status as an able kitarrist to the ghana community. The ghana community present at public events (including “distant kitarristi” and “ghannejja and the wider ghana community”) will often only hear a prim kitarrist when he has already gained competent musical ability away from their gaze. A skilled akkumpanjist will, equally, be recognised as such beyond his close social circles by being seen performing regularly in public and being observed playing alongside other highly regarded akkumpanjisti or prim kitarristi.
My model of the Ghana community as a composite of overlapping communities of practice provides the contextual social framework for a kitarrist's musical development. With this framework in place, I can now more coherently examine what is transmitted, when, by whom, and how. In the remainder of this chapter I propose that a kitarrist progresses through five stages of learning prejjem which involve him engaging with three ‘spheres of learning’ formed by his negotiating social relationships in (and as) environments of learning.

3.2 A model of learning prejjem: stages one to three

Bruno Nettl describes the process of a musician learning a musical system as his learning the “discrete units”, or the “building blocks”, of the tradition: ways of performing, abstract fundamental principles, how to compose, how to improvise, how to listen (Nettl 2005:388, 392). Chiener Chou considers how learning these units of a musical system involves the performer engaging with the whole community through processes that include

- practicing the skills of performance, adopting ways of perceiving these skills,
- acquiring the verbal knowledge of critics and theorists through discourse about musical events, coming to recognize areas of contact between the spheres of musicians and non-musicians, and gaining skill in organizing musical activities such as rehearsals, ceremonies and other events. (Chou 2002:84-85)

Each of Ghana’s musical and social “building blocks” are learned by a kitarrist piecemeal through various methods of engagement with the whole Ghana community. Each of these blocks may be transmitted in different ways from potentially different sources within the Ghana community; however, there are no formal learning domains
for prejjem (or ghana) – there are no apprenticeships (in the commonly-accepted understanding of the term), guilds, schools, conservatories, private lessons or rehearsals (after Rice 2003:73). Musical knowledge is synthesised through social interactions rather than explicitly taught.

Patricia Shehan Campbell identifies three categories of social-situational learning processes that determine how these musical building blocks may be transmitted: enculturative processes (as “natural” and without formal instruction), partly-guided processes (via informal and non-consecutive instruction), and highly structured and sequential processes (through formal learning, such as in schools) (Campbell 2010:230). For *prejjem*, there are enculturative processes and partly-guided processes, but there is no highly structured process. However, Campbell’s highly structured process of learning can be refigured as a highly *disciplined* process of self-determined development. With this revision, my first three stages of learning *prejjem* map onto each of Campbell’s three categories. Stage one, the acquisition of musical norms and associated behaviours, is largely an enculturative process. Stage two, the learning of basic techniques and accepted musical patterns, manifests partly-guided processes of informal learning. Stage three, the development of advanced ability and taste, is a highly disciplined process of self-determined development. As a student *kitarrist* learns the same material in stages one and two regardless of whether he will ultimately become a *prim kitarrist* or an *akkumpanjist*, I do not separate the learning processes of *prim* or *akkumpanjament* students until their natural divergence at stage three.

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70 Gregory Bateson devised a model of continuous learning that bears similarity to Campbell’s. For Bateson, “learning 1” is one’s unreflective absorption of music within an environment (enculturation); “learning 2” incorporates cognition, combining one’s experience with the objective of becoming a performer (“learning to learn”); and “learning 3” is an aesthetic experience of reflecting on one’s previous levels of learning (Bateson 1972 (1987), in Campbell 1991:82).
**Stage one: the acquisition of musical norms and associated behaviours**

In this stage an individual is introduced to the ghana community, experiences musical performances and begins to assimilate the community’s behavioural norms. In this primarily public sphere of learning, the individual begins to negotiate an identity formed from his engaging with the practices and attitudes of the ghana community – the broad, “generalised other”, in George Herbert Mead’s terms (Mead 1934) – synthesising an understanding of the ghana community’s musical and behavioural norms largely through a process of enculturation. Following Lucy Green’s depiction of musical enculturation as the “acquisition of musical skills and knowledge by immersion in the everyday music and musical practices of one’s social context” (Green 2001:22), in attending musical events in bars, at public events and in homes, the student (though he may not yet regard himself as one) will become familiar both with the sound of ghana as well as with the activities, roles and hierarchies of respect and sociability that constitute its community. Immersion in the ghana community typically occurs from a very young age. It is not unusual to find children as young as three or four years old accompanying a relative to an ghana bar in Malta, although some daqqaqa begin to engage with ghana as a teenager or in later life.

I make a particular point of framing this first stage as acquiring rather than learning norms and behaviours, following Edward Hall’s distinction between the two terms. From a biological perspective, Hall suggests that the process of acquiring information from one’s environment is associated with a different part of the brain to that of “word- and number-based learning” (Hall 1992:225-226): “all of us continue to acquire the behavior patterns in which we are immersed on a day-to-day basis and this process of acquisition is augmented, but not displaced, by learning” (ibid.:227). Campbell summarises Hall’s theory of acquisition as a “non-conscious process by which understanding emerges as preliminary to, but also coincidental with
learning” (Campbell 2001:218), determining that acquisition is “similar to ‘implicit learning’, a process by which people come into contact with knowledge outside their conscious awareness” (ibid.). However, Alan Rogers does not identify so clear a distinction, describing acquisition learning rather as experiential learning:

It employs play, exploration and experimentation, trial and error, copying and mimicking, practising and self-evaluation ... It is not always conscious learning but it is based on the agency of the learner, for the initiative comes mainly from the learner, although rewards may be sought by the learner in terms of pleasing significant others. (Rogers 2003:17)

Furthermore, Rogers states that “[a]cquisition learning is always concrete, immediate and confined to a specific activity; it is not concerned with general principles” (ibid.:18). For Rogers, acquisition learning is an active process (albeit a largely unconscious one) toward identifiable goals. Entering into a new community can be determined as a goal-directed trajectory – the desire to be part of that collective, to make friends, to gain the respect of those with influence, to take part in their activities. These goals are achieved through the play of socialisation; however, I do agree with Campbell that the processes and behaviours which lead to their attainment may be unconsciously acquired rather than intentionally learned. As an example scenario, a boy wishing to ingratiate himself with an ghannej or kitarrist in a bar might fetch him a drink. This action may symbolise the boy’s desire for recognition, it may be a way for him to engage with those who possess authority within the community, it may facilitate his entry into other social circles, or it may be an opportunity to develop a friendship which could subsequently
lead to musical instruction. Fetching a drink is not taught behaviour, but an imitative enactment of the observed behaviours of others. My list of potential end-goals may not, in fact, be recognised by the boy, such is the nature of imitative behaviour; the action of buying a drink might just be seen as the done thing in this communal setting.

A general awareness of ghana’s structures, tonality and timbrality is acquired through exposure to it in its performance environments. This is an encultured understanding that is based not solely on musical markers, but also on social ones. An individual might recognise a kadenza as much by a change in audience activity as by its tonal shift and extended structure. Different subgenres of ghana might be recognised not only by their differences in musical style, but also by the expectant atmosphere that accompanies the presence of a particular ghannej who specialises in ghana fil-gholi, for example. Therefore, the attitude toward ghana fil-gholi as a special event is perpetuated by an individual’s introduction to it in this sense. The imitation of behaviour through direct and indirect observation underpins the enculturative, acquisitional and experiential learning processes that are being detailed in this chapter. Furthermore, one’s initial exposure to ghana is often facilitated by kin, who as significant others help to fashion a potential student’s formative behaviours and attitudes toward the tradition.

A brief overview of the ways in which some of the kitarristi I have worked with were first introduced to ghana reveals how existing familial relationships to the social environments of ghana often feature prominently (see also Fsadni 1993:346). John Grima tal-Belt’s father, a dilettant, escorted his young son to ghana bars and persuaded him to participate by purchasing for him a terżin tat-tromba from Indri Brincat il-Pupa (John Grima personal communication 2013). When Salvu Tanti il-Kanadż was a young adult, his uncle, a kitarrist, took him to Maltese-Canadian social clubs in Toronto and

71 Similar motivations for buying drinks and cigarettes for ghannejja were also noted by Herndon (Herndon 1971:74).
Mississauga, encouraging him to play the guitar after noticing his interest in the instrument (Tanti interview 2013a). Similarly, it was Steve Ciantar *il-Furkett*’s uncle who introduced him to *ghana* bars in Siġġiewi as a boy (Ciantar interview 2013). Ionut Mifsud *it-Tifel ta’ Vestru*’s father, Frans Mifsud *ta’ Vestru*, is a prominent *ghannej* who began to take Ionut to *ghan* sessions as a teenager. Kevin Spagnol *it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi* was encouraged to play by his father, Żeppi Spagnol *il-Kelba*, a celebrated *fatt* singer and an *akkumpanjist* who had maintained a close relationship with Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* since the 1960s. Kalčidon Vella *ta’ Mustaċċa* and his children, Mark and Denise, come from a family of *kitarristi* (Vella interview 2012). Raymond Schembri *iċ-Ċiranu*, a *kitarrist* and *ghan* *fil-gholi* singer, is from a family of *fil-gholi* singers, but began his musical career as a young adult by playing the guitar alongside his *akkumpanjist* father (Schembri interview 2013). Other *kitarristi* were introduced to *ghan* by friends, not family. John Saliba *ta’ Birżebbuġa* was a popular musician in New York who, on returning to Malta, heard a neighbour of his play *ghan* (John Saliba personal communication 2013). In Sydney, Ronnie Borg was introduced to *akkumpanjist* Joe Bonello *is-Skuti* by a mutual friend who was also a *kitarrist* (Bonello interview 2013a; Ronnie Borg personal communication 2014). Joe Galea was a guitarist and singer in a popular music band in Sydney when he was introduced to two *dilettanti* at a wedding at which he was performing (Bonello interview 2013b; Galea interview 2014).

As tabulated in figure 49, of the seventeen *prim* *kitarristi* I have worked with only four had no apparent kin relation in the tradition. The same survey among eight *akkumpanjisti* follows in figure 50, of whom only one had no prior familial relationship to *ghan*.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A male relative is a kitarrist</th>
<th>A male relative is an ghannej or dilettant</th>
<th>No familial relationship to ghana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Bonello is-Skuti</td>
<td>Charlie Attard il-Bukkaċċ</td>
<td>Ronnie Borg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fredu Cachia il-Fra</td>
<td>Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ</td>
<td>Joe Galea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Cutajar il-Wilji</td>
<td>Ray Attard</td>
<td>Frederick Mallia ir-Re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Žeppi</td>
<td>Rita Brincat</td>
<td>John Saliba ta’ Birżebbuġa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalćidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa</td>
<td>Steve Ciantar il-Furkett</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Vella</td>
<td>John Grima tal-Belt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 49. Table of familial links to għana: prim kitarristi.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A male relative is a kitarrist</th>
<th>A male relative is an ghannej or dilettant</th>
<th>No familial relationship to għana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl</td>
<td>Joe Bonello is-Skuti</td>
<td>Žeppi Spagnol il-Kelba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Camilleri is-Sponos</td>
<td>Raymond Schembri iċ-Ċiraru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Sammut Pellituru</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvu Tanti il-Kanadiż</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise Vella Cachia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 50. Table of familial links to għana: akkumpanjist kitarristi.*

The majority of these kitarristi – twenty out of twenty-five – have a pre-existing familial tie to the għana community (specifically the father or an uncle). Yet, of these twenty kin relations, only eleven were kitarristi, suggesting that there is indeed a great deal of overlap between communities of practice. However, this data is not definitive, as my informants only represent a small proportion of those active in present-day kitarrist
communities in Malta and Australia. The tables also do not differentiate between individuals living in Malta or Australia, or who belong to different age groups. Furthermore, although some of my informants had kin involved in the ghana community when they joined, that does not necessarily mean that they were the ones who introduced them to the community or encouraged their interest in the guitar. For example, as a child Tony Camilleri is-Sponos would follow his akkumpanjist father Neriku Camilleri is-Sponos to the clubs, but it was not until after Neriku’s death that Tony began to play the guitar (Camilleri interview 2014). A similar story is told by Joe Cutajar il-Witli of his increased interest in ghana following his own father’s death (Joe Cutajar personal communication 2014). Fredu Cachia il-Fra’s father took him to the clubs as a boy, but it was not until he was old enough to visit them on his own, aged sixteen or seventeen, that he really began to participate (Cachia 2001). KalĊidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa’s father, Steven, taught him some basic prejjem melodies, yet KalĊidon often went to ghana bars alone as his father was not as interested in ghana as he was (Vella interview 2013a). The majority of kitarristi did, nevertheless, have a relative who was already involved in the ghana community when they began to participate, and these relatives, in a large number of cases, had a hand in these individuals’ induction into the community.  

Stage one of my learning model is the period during which an individual acquires the behavioural norms of the ghana community through which he begins to recognise its musical system. The transition from stage one into stage two is marked by the individual’s conscious awareness of his desire to develop performative musical

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72 Jeremy Boissevain provides an excellent overview of the impact of kin relations on sociability in Malta, depicting a boy’s initiation and involvement in male environments of sociability in village bars and clubs during festa (Boissevain 2006:15-30). Boissevain identifies matrilineal blood uncles as being particularly close to a young boy (maternal uncles are often godfathers), frequently providing a goodnatured, kindly balance to the father’s sternness: “the father disciplines his son; the uncles usually spoil him” (Boissevain 2006:30). Fsadni also notes a similar attachment to the uncle among young ghannejja (Fsadni 1993:346).
skills, to become an active participant in the production of music and to develop an identity that is not simply relational to an existing participant (the son / nephew / grandson of X) – he chooses to become more than an audience member and begins to engage with a community of practice.

Stage two: learning basic techniques and accepted musical patterns

The second stage of my model represents an individual’s induction into a community of practice within the ghana community. In making a conscious decision to engage with the guitar component of ghana, the student has new environments open to him in which he can begin to develop relationships that will provide him with musical knowledge via a semi-public sphere of learning – characterised by self-conscious, partly-guided learning processes. I use the term ‘learning’ here, rather than the ‘acquisition’ of stage one, as at this point the individual is aware of his status as a student; he has decided to engage more deeply with the ghana community as an active performer. He will already have gained an idea of the tonality of prejjem, its structures and its performance aesthetics, but now he will begin to pay closer attention, start asking questions and acquire his own guitar. This, in Lave and Wenger’s terms, is “learning in practice”, the intentional movement of a newcomer toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community (Lave and Wenger 1991:29). By learning how to access musical knowledge and how to apply it the student is “learning to learn” (Campbell 1991:82). Through partly-guided learning processes the student will in this stage learn akkumpanjament chords, their sequences and plucking techniques, and begin to understand the guitar tuning system and the musical terminology used by kitarristi. If a student desires to become a prim kitarrist he will simultaneously begin to learn common melodic patterns and the appropriate right-hand techniques. During this stage, a student kitarrist will associate himself with a group of
kitarristi who are within the localised ghana community with which he has associated. He will play with this group in homes or during quiet times in a bar, and he may apprentice himself to, or be taken under the wing of, a particular akkumpanjist or prim kitarrist within this group. As he becomes more proficient and confident, the kitarrist community will provide him with opportunities to perform in public sessions.

According to Campbell, verbal explanations do not play a large role in the training of a musician in many cultures; demonstration is a more direct method of instruction (ibid.:188, 102-106). This is also true of prejjem. Musical material is learned via the observation and imitation of established kitarristi and through partly-guided learning processes that are facilitated by them. Although there does exist a small musical lexicon, as noted in chapter two, generally this is limited to language that assists the ensemble in practical matters of tuning, setting tempo and defining performance roles. A base musical knowledge is imparted by kitarristi to the student through partly-guided learning processes, although this is typically limited to being shown how to pluck the strings and shape the chords of A major, E major seventh and D major – enough material to facilitate the development of a La akkumpanjist. Some students receive a tactile approach, like Kalcidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa whose father taught him by pressing his fingers onto the fretboard (Vella interview 2012); others receive more technical instruction, such as Tony Camilleri is-Sponos who was shown chords by his brother, Frans, in the form of guitar tablature (Camilleri interview 2014).

The most important factor that facilitates learning is environment. Kitarristi often meet in semi-public environments such as homes, and in bars like Klabb tal-Boċċi in Pieta (which closed in 2012) at times when ghannejja are less likely to be present (Tanti interview 2013a). Another popular venue of this kind is Nusu’s Bar in Qormi, which is often the exclusive domain of kitarristi. In these spaces, kitarristi are free to play whatever they wish without the interrupting presence of ghannejja or an audience,
creating an environment within which knowledge transmission can more readily occur. Such conditions are cherished by kitarristi, who often prefer to play amongst themselves. McLeod and Herndon designate this particular type of gathering as “in the quiet” (fil-kwiet): “these more informal settings are a common time for ... playing around with ideas. People feel more relaxed in such settings because they frequently have an audience they can trust” (McLeod and Herndon 1980:161). Furthermore, fil-kwiet, “a semi-competent guitarist may be given the opportunity to play solo which he would never have, otherwise” (ibid.). An account of one such private gathering of six to eight kitarristi at Nusu’s Bar illustrates how different building blocks of musical knowledge can be transmitted in this kind of environment.

We gather one Sunday morning at Nusu’s around a large table in a long, narrow side room away from the main bar. This space appears to have been a garage before it was converted into a (well-kept) storage area. The walls are decorated with a couple of old guitars and photographs of kitarristi, including Indri Brincat il-Pupa. An ġhana cassette is playing quietly in the main bar. The patrons in there duck their head around the door to say hello once or twice, but they do not stay. The owner, George in-Nusu, brings us drinks and snacks throughout the two or three hours we spend there. The bar has existed for a couple of decades and has a reputation as an ġhana venue that is particularly favourable to kitarristi – indeed, the alleyway leading to what was Brincat’s home is visible from the doorway. Everyone here are good friends and clearly enjoy their time together. This convivial atmosphere permits more open and detailed discussions about music than I find at other bar-based sessions. Much talk about guitars takes place this morning, facilitated by the presence of a luthier (and dilettant) who proceeds to describe the different sized models he makes and their heritage. After I play

73 The occasion I describe occurred at the same time as ġhana sessions were taking place in a number of bars elsewhere across the island. By absenting themselves from these sessions the kitarristi at Nusu’s Bar were making a statement about where they felt most comfortable and where their primary friendship allegiances lay.
akkumpanjament for a piece of kitarri biss, one akkumpanjist suggests I should make my bass notes more prominent by plucking the strings harder. Later, another akkumpanjist suggests to a less experienced prim kitarrist that he might vary the loudness and timbre of his playing to create more interest, indicating where to pluck the string between the bridge and the soundhole to find these tones. This particular pedagogical approach appears to occur only in a close-knit, semi-public environment among kitarristi; I have not encountered such constructive criticisms between kitarristi at a more public għana event. John Grima tal-Belt, a prim kitarrist I had recently met who knew that I was capable of following more complex akkumpanjament structures, shows me a new sequence of chords for a prelude. Whilst he is calling out the chords to me and counting the number of times the pattern cycles, another young, budding prim kitarrist attempts to follow the akkumpanjament pattern along with an older prim kitarrist who recognises it. After we have grasped the pattern and play it through a few times, paying careful attention to the segue into a standard prelude, Grima proceeds to describe it as a common song sequence in the past, leading to a conversation about older generations of kitarristi and their styles of playing. Such a moment as this which transmits knowledge from a master to students also provides the master with an opportunity to perform a song sequence that he has not attempted in many years. Grima’s prejjem improves as we cycle through the piece; fragments of melodies latent in his memory slowly beginning to correspond with finger movements. Thus, this particular encounter furnishes students with stage two knowledge, whilst simultaneously providing the master with an opportunity to exercise melodies that evidence his own stage five learning (a continuous presentation and reflexive evaluation of his own style).

This kind of informal, task-conscious, directed learning facilitated by conversation only tends to occur in semi-public environments where relatively close
members of the *kitarrist* community of practice can gather away from the wider *ghana* community. These are the social conditions in which specific fragments of knowledge are transmitted through partly-guided processes – a defining characteristic of stage two of my model. “In the quiet” is also a space in which, to quote McLeod and Herndon’s depiction of this environment, the *kitarrist* “brings to the fore those things which he has already partially worked out in a truly private moment which he wishes to display for his friends” (ibid.) – an opportunity that will gain greater significance in stage three of my model. McLeod and Herndon claim that it is in these semi-public environments, among close friends, that new musical forms and styles are developed (ibid.:164). Being privy to these kinds of semi-public environments is to be invested specifically in the deeper sociability of the *kitarrist* community of practice (certainly so if such encounters occur in the privacy of homes), as opposed to that of the broader *ghana* community or any of its other nested communities of practice. Here, in stage two learning, relationships are defined and negotiated through mutual engagement with the guitar and its music in environments that are conducive to private conversation pertaining to particular aspects of the *kitarrist* community of practice.

**Stage three: the development of advanced ability and taste**

In the third stage of learning the student reinforces the basic knowledge he learns in stage two and advances it more autonomously through self-directed, heuristic learning methods. Up to this point student *akkumpanjisti* and potential *prim kitarristi* acquire and learn musical knowledge in a similar way, in similar environments, through similar processes. Now, two paths are open to the student which determine the nature of this phase of his learning: he may choose to remain an *akkumpanjist* or he can focus his attention on becoming a *prim kitarrist*. Quite often a budding *prim kitarrist* is aware of his predilection at the start of his engagement with the community.
At the point of transition from stage two into stage three learning the student begins to develop musical taste. Taste for an akkumpanjist is manifested in subtly managing the fit between the guitar ensemble and the ghannejja, and between the akkumpanjament and the prim kitarrist. He learns when to embellish and when to “play low”, how to accommodate and control difficult ghannejja and prim kitarristi, and how to maintain an even tempo (see chapter two). Because an akkumpanjist’s role is to accompany and provide fit between the component parts of ghana, he is less able to contribute unique developments to the tradition: he must maintain general attitudes toward taste rather than establish his own. For an akkumpanjist, developing ability and a reputation at this stage is slow, demanding sustained involvement with a group (or groups) of kitarristi and perhaps an affiliation with a guitar trio ensemble – in other words, his learning continues to take place in public and semi-public environments and spheres of learning. Being seen to perform regularly garners him respect, whilst also providing him with opportunities to refine the subtleties of being a good akkumpanjist.

From stage three a prim kitarrist develops somewhat differently to an akkumpanjist. A prim student will gravitate toward an established prim kitarrist whose style he feels an affinity with in order to develop and nuance his playing toward a musical goal. For a prim kitarrist, developing taste may well lead him away from his initial group of close kitarristi to seek out others who can assist him in attaining his aesthetic goal. At this point in his learning, the student prim kitarrist is not as reliant on receiving instruction via close relationships to develop his playing as he can now pick up melodies by ear. With these skills a student prim kitarrist may now have access to individuals in the distant kitarristi circle of the kitarrist community of practice – he has begun to develop a private sphere of learning. That is not to say that close relationships do not continue to figure (indeed, apprentice-like relationships often do), but that the
student, no longer requiring direct teaching or guidance, is able to look further afield and employ more indirect methods to gather material for his playing.

Many akkumpanjisti state that they do not wish to become a prim kitarrist because they are, for example, “not keen to get that serious” (Schembri interview 2013). Simply taking part in a performance and engaging with a convivial community is desirable. Salvu Tanti il-Kanadiż suggests that being a kitarrist, particularly a prim kitarrist, is something of a calling:

If you want to learn guitar it has to be in you. That’s the first step, to have ability. A person is born with it ... [e]specially the lead guitarist ... I could show you how to play, but you have to improvise yourself – the tempo, the melodies and everything else. It could be taught, but I’d say you’re born with it. (Tanti interview 2013a)

What Tanti describes is a belief held by the ghana community that daqqaqa possess an innate ability, something more than just technical skill – what Raymond Schembri iċ-Ċiranu describes as “having it in you” (Schembri interview 2013). Belief in this phenomenon among ghannejja has been noted by ghana scholars (Galley and Pullicino 1996:72-74; also Fsadni 1993:344-345, 348-349), but it has not yet been attributed to kitarristi despite its prevalence among them. According to this view, even though kitarristi may share musical knowledge with each other, it is the student’s innate talent that ultimately propels him beyond the ordinary.

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74 In one interview, Indri Brincat il-Pupa (twice) claimed that no-one taught him how to play or make guitars; instead he was “born a professor” (“jiem hriği professur minn żaqq omni”) (Brincat 2009).
In regard to this, I have generally found *prim kitarristi* unable or reluctant to articulate details of their learning process. This may be due to a desire to perpetuate the myth of their born-ability as much as it might also be a result of the fragmentary nature of the learning process itself. The following excerpts from an interview with *prim kitarrist* Steve Ciantar *il-Furkett* illustrates these points.

[Andrew Pace] Do you remember who showed you how to play the guitar?
[Steve Ciantar] No, it was only me. Only me. When I say ... I want to do this, I see and I try to do it myself. I’d watch other people.

[AP] How would you practise playing *prim*? Do you play along with recordings?
[SC] No, from here [points to head]. I don’t know how it comes on me ... Nobody shows me how. It comes on me ... It’s like when someone has a good mind. If he sees a table, he makes it; if he sees a cupboard, he makes it. I’m the kind of person who, when I hear something, I try to put it in my mind and play it.

(Ciantar interview 2013)

Ciantar’s responses proceed along similar lines: his ability to play *prejjem* emerged from within him, with little or no outside influence beyond his observing and imitating others. On changing my line of questioning I elicited a more detailed response about his learning process:

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75 Upon questioning myself as to how I learned to play the guitar as a boy, I found that I had no recollection beyond listening to the radio and imitating what I heard. Despite my starting aged eight, I cannot remember a time when I did *not* know how to play the guitar.
[AP] Are certain melodies associated with a particular guitarist?

[SC] Sometimes, with Indri [Brincat] and Tapp [Karmenu Cardona].

[AP] Is your style of playing recognisable?

[SC] If I start playing they would recognise some things ... My favourites [phrases].

[AP] Are those phrases ones you’ve come up with yourself?

[SC] No, I copied them – from Indri, from Tapp, you know ... I try and blend them.

(Ciantar interview 2013)

Here Ciantar describes engaging in the kind of taste-driven, self-directed learning that is characteristic of stage three learning. In response to my very first question, Ciantar describes how he watches prim kitarristi to learn how things are done, but his last response suggests he is taking this a step further by synthesising elements of other prim kitarristi’s melodies to develop his own style. Both of these methods are examples of stage three learning: the former process is undertaken in semi-public spheres of learning by observing other kitarristi from a distance, whilst the latter, the “blending” described by Ciantar, is a self-directed, practical application of this knowledge that is developed in a private sphere of learning away from the gaze of the community. The knowledge that is gleaned from observing other kitarristi is usually applied and developed later on, in a private sphere of learning. This private sphere also involves listening to recordings of prim kitarristi, which often reinforce lessons learned from observing their live performances.

Advanced abilities such as these are typically honed in a private sphere of learning that is characterised by a lack of relationships. The student may learn by observing other kitarristi publicly and later translate this onto his own guitar, or he may
learn at home from audio and video recordings. James Kippen neatly describes this kind of process as “learning behind the curtain” (Kippen 2008:129), suggesting how musical knowledge can be obtained somewhat surreptitiously. A kitarrist may continue to apprentice himself to an individual or group of close kitarristi to develop his playing – perhaps listening to recordings together or being shown how to play certain patterns – but these interactions would be difficult to classify as lessons. A master kitarrist may have a number of student kitarristi eager to be near him, but they are not his students in the sense of him actively imparting knowledge to them as a teacher. Rather, much of the material learned by the student in these instances is via observation, imitation and conversation. This is a particular kind of apprenticeship, one that I would term a self-directed apprenticeship, which places the intent to learn in the hands of the student rather than on any particular desire on the part of the master to transmit knowledge.76

Some examples of learning that have occurred almost entirely within a private sphere illustrate how a student kitarrist can initiate a self-directed apprenticeship to a master even without the latter’s awareness. John Grima tal-Belt once played me a tape of him playing in the style of Pawlu Frendo il-Bożen, a master kitarrist from a generation before him. Although Grima had only once played with Frendo, for ten minutes, from watching him perform in public many times and by studying his recordings Grima had been able to successfully imitate Frendo’s style. Similarly, Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestru – aged 15 years at the time of our first meeting – had learnt a great deal from listening to 1960s and 1970s recordings of Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl, who had in fact died before Mifsud was born. Owing to the presence of recording technology over the past sixty years, a student can listen to (and more recently watch) a

76 In their work on communities of practice, Lave and Wenger point to the variety of ways in which an apprenticeship can manifest in the real world and the effects of this relationship on a student: “We wanted to broaden the traditional connotations of the concept of apprenticeship – from a master/student or mentor/mentee relationship to one of changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice” (Wenger 1998:11).
vast number of performances of *prim kitarristi* in order to study their melodies and
techniques. Videos of master *kitarristi* are often particularly prized (and sometimes
carefully guarded) as they can reveal ‘secret’ positions and fingerings that allow certain
melodies to be executed.

I would assume that more formal master-apprentice relationships occurred
before recordings existed. What little we know of pedagogy immediately following the
Second World War suggests that learning took place within close-knit groups of
*kitarristi* who regularly met in private. For example, Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* and
Pawlu Frendo *il-Bożen* learned directly from Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*; Ċaren Debono
*ta’ Minka* and Grezzu Ellul *ta’ Ċanća* from Indri Brincat *il-Pupa*. These type of
apprenticeships appear to be rooted in very close friendships and suggest a total
immersion and investment in one style of playing. However, although this mode of
learning is still encountered to an extent today, the increasing prominence of the private
sphere of learning since the emergence of recording technology has accelerated the
speed and diversity with which a *kitarrist* can develop his ability. By the 1960s and
1970s, the broadening of the private sphere of learning thanks to tape technology
facilitated an increasing number of *kitarristi* to learn *prejjem* outside the realm of
sociability. This factor had a compounding effect on the myth of born-ability as student
*kitarristi* were able to learn in their bedrooms, re-emerging after a time with an
advanced ability honed away from the gaze of even his close *kitarristi* circle of friends.
3.3 Recordings as a learning tool:
A break from face-to-face relationships and temporality

Before I move on to stages four and five of my learning model, I wish to more closely examine the impact of audio-visual recordings on the ghana tradition and the power that these objects have to transform the status of a student prim kitarrist during the third stage of his learning. Privately-made recordings of public and private ghana events and radio broadcasts, predominantly on formats such as reel-to-reel magnetic tape (1950s-1980s), audio cassette (1970s-2000s), mp3 (2000s-), VHS (1980s-2000s), DV (1990s-2000s) and hard disk/flash memory devices (2000s-), have played a significant role in the transmission of ghana since the mid-twentieth century. Audio and video recordings of ghana performances have increased exponentially as recording technology has become more affordable and portable.\footnote{77} These pervasive documents of past performances are commonly found in the homes of daqqqa and dilettanti in Malta and its diaspora, having been copied and shared among the ghana community as gifts and mementoes since the late 1950s. There has yet to be a survey of extant ghana recordings, but certainly they number in the thousands.\footnote{78} Recordings of several generations of celebrated Maltese and Maltese-Australian prim kitarristi are commonly found in private collections, including Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp, Indri Brincat il-Pupa, Ray Attard, Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ, Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba and Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi, to name a few. Recordings of other kitarristi are less commonly

\footnote{77} Those who record ghana often invest a great deal of money into their hobby. In 1970, Herndon noted how one dilettant owned three professional reel-to-reel recorders, each of which had cost him the equivalent of a month’s wages (Herndon 1971:252-253). In present day Malta, a daqqqa showed me a VHS video camera that he had purchased for $2000 in Australia in the mid-1980s – a significant amount of money at the time for a labouring man with a young family. Thanks to the falling cost of technology, today many daqqqa and dilettanti favour small portable (usually audio) devices that cost very little, but which produce good results.

\footnote{78} As an indication of the prevalence of recording technology even as early as 1970, Herndon noted that one dilettant in Malta had amassed a collection of two hundred tapes over the previous decade (Herndon 1971:257).
encountered: Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl, Žeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Ahmar, Pawlu Frendo il-Božen. The rarity of some prim kitarristi’s recordings can be attributed to their having been recorded less often than others, but in some cases it may be that the circulation of their recordings is being controlled by those who possess them. It would appear that recordings embody something of the memoriality that we find in the guitars of master kitarristi (as in chapter one). Audio-visual recordings serve a number of practical functions to the ghana community: they are a means of documenting ghana performances for enjoyment at a later date or to share with those who could not be present for the live event, they provide a channel of communication between diasporic ghana communities, and they serve as learning tools for kitarristi. In chapter four I shall turn to the communicative aspect of recordings, but in this chapter I concentrate on their role in learning.

There are two ways to consider recordings in the context of learning and transmission: firstly as a learning tool in place of a teacher-student relationship, and secondly as a learning tool alongside a teacher-student relationship. When a kitarrist begins to learn from recordings, he breaks from the kind of face-to-face social learning contexts in which he has participated up to this point. Learning in public and semi-public spheres involves relationships with other kitarristi; learning in private spheres – principally enabled through recordings – entails a lack of such relationships. Even though recordings can be listened to in public and semi-public environments, generally speaking they are a private experience – a one-way transmission of knowledge that removes the capacity for conversation (although conversation may occur if kitarristi listen to recordings together). Much of this listening occurs in private environments, where a prim student sits alone manipulating a cassette or a DVD to learn material. This activity is representative of stage three of my learning model, where the student is engaged in self-directed learning in a highly disciplined process of self-determined
development. He is choosing what he wishes to learn and how to incorporate it into his own playing.

In his book *On becoming a rock musician*, H. Stith Bennett points to the prevalence of students learning via recordings in that genre. However, rock music differs fundamentally from *prejjem* in that its recorded performance is the source document, the ultimate model to imitate: “whether or not the initiate learns from a recording or from a teacher who has learned from a recording, the ability to get songs from records is the essential process for the transmission of rock music” (Bennett 1980:138). For *prejjem*, there is no such definitive source performance to replicate or aspire to. *Kitarristi* regard historic *ghana* recordings not as templates for reproduction, but as source material from which to gather raw material and ideas for their own unique improvisations. *Prejjem* is more akin to jazz practices, whose performers mine recordings for “vocabulary, ideas, licks, tricks” (Berliner 1994:95). However, Bennett’s study is insightful in regard to the conceptual domain in which the student learns from recordings:

The most important thing to notice about the initial interaction of recordings and musicians is its privacy. Although the self-taught student does not have the benefit of a more experienced musician as a guide, there is also freedom from the human expectation system of pedagogy. A beginner can therefore proceed at his or her own speed, and, by manipulating the controllable electronic playback system, select certain temporal segments for focused attention (Bennett 1980:134).

The lack of a live human pedagogical relationship emancipates the student from the expectations and (social and musical) limitations of local teachers within the circles of
kitarristi he has access to, whilst simultaneously providing him with complete control over what is learned and in what sequence. Additionally, the idiosyncrasies of human performance which can confuse and frustrate a student are removed – the mechanical consistency and “controllable repetition of recordings” (ibid.) are valuable learning aids. The student is limited only by his prevailing technical and musical ability and his own determination to improve.\textsuperscript{79} As has been evident throughout my study so far, the capacity to learn by ear is fundamental to becoming a good \textit{prim kitarrist}.

As I have stated, learning from recordings in a private sphere can detach the student from the physicality of face-to-face relationships that are negotiated in social environments of learning. Yet, recordings may also pave the way for new relationships to form that can further enrich a student’s learning. The following case studies reveal how two \textit{prim kitarristi} progressed to stage three learning and how their use of recordings subsequently facilitated new relationships which became pivotal to their continued learning.

\textbf{Frederick Mallia \textit{ir-Re}}

As a teenager, Frederick Mallia \textit{ir-Re} (born 1987, Malta) became a patron of the Klabb tal-Bočči in Pieta, a popular \textit{ghana} bar to which he was introduced by a neighbour of his in Naxxar, Raymond Schembri \textit{iċ-Ċirau}. Although Mallia was initially drawn to singing, Schembri encouraged him to play the guitar instead and taught Mallia the basics of \textit{akkumpanjament} in his home. Soon afterward Mallia began to engage with the seven or eight other \textit{kitarristi} who regularly frequented Klabb tal-

\textsuperscript{79} Ray Attard’s determination to play as a teenager is representative of many other \textit{kitarristi}’s struggles: “I’d have three or four cassette players going … guitars everywhere. I’d wake up at three in the morning to go in the garden … knowing that I’ll get eaten by mosquitoes, but I wouldn’t feel it until I got back to bed. All so that I wouldn’t wake up my parents and sisters. I go outside, put the light on and just be playing. I’d dream of tunes. Oh, where’s the guitar … It was there, always tuned. Dad will kill me; mum will kill me … Outside. But that's what it takes. A person with motivation can do anything. If you don’t have the motivation, forget it” (Attard interview 2014).
Boċċi. When Mallia showed an interest in playing *prim*, first John Grima *tal-Belt* then Tony Farrugia *ta’ Birżebbuġa* assisted him. Mallia was particularly drawn to Farrugia as he played somewhat in the style of Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl*, whose recordings Mallia had been listening to in Schembri’s garage. Over time Mallia eventually – in Schembri’s words – “went above him [Farrugia] – he passed him. Then he was good” (Schembri interview 2013). At this point Mallia emerged as an accomplished *prim* *kitarrist* who had learned as much as he wanted to from those in his close *kitarristi* circle of the *kitarrist* community of practice. He was now capable of learning further musical knowledge independently – which he demonstrated by continuing to engage with Aquilina’s recordings privately in Schembri’s garage – whilst continuing to participate in musical and social activities with his friends in the bar and elsewhere.

In this example we can see Mallia follow the path of learning laid out in stages one and two of my model. His advanced ability and stylistic affinities were afforded to him through recordings – if he had not been drawn to Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl*’s style of playing through recordings (Aquilina had been dead many years), he may not have spent time with Tony Farrugia *ta’ Birżebbuġa*. Having access to recordings of Aquilina presented Mallia with a fortuitous pathway in other respects, too. When Mallia began to play a few of Aquilina’s florid melodies in the bar, Karmnu’s son George Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* (an *akkumpanjist* and a patron of Klabb tal-Boċċi) recognised the style and accosted Mallia: “How did you find it? Do you have my father’s video?!” (Aquilina interview 2013). This particular video – one that Mallia had viewed in Schembri’s home – was one of two that existed of Aquilina playing. George maintains a careful hold over his late father’s recordings, limiting access to them when he can, believing that to share them more widely would permit people to steal his style of playing. However, George saw that Mallia had respect for his father and eventually began to share recordings with him, inviting him over to his own garage to listen to
them. During these occasions if Mallia was struggling to achieve a particular effect George would explain how his father would, for example, pluck a string to achieve the desired timbre or colouring (Aquilina interview 2013). By entwining a private sphere of learning with face-to-face sociability, Mallia moved closer to his end goal of playing like Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl.

Ray Attard

Ray Attard (born 1970, Sydney, Australia) first attended ghana sessions in Sydney as a young boy with his father. Drawn to the guitar as a teenager, he began to learn from his father (an akkumpanjist and an ghannej) and from watching kitarristi as they performed. When Attard expressed an interest in playing prim, aged around 16, Joe Galea, an accomplished prim kitarrist in Sydney, helped him to learn some of the techniques and melodies. Meanwhile Attard was also learning from reel-to-reel tape recordings of kitarristi such as Indri Brincat il-Pupa and Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp which had been given to him by an elderly dilettant friend. Attard began to copy these reels onto cassette so that he could more easily rewind and replay passages, although he found the speed reduction facility that was available on reel-to-reel players offered him the advantageous ability of slowing down passages. Through these recordings Attard first imitated the style of Żeppi Farrugia ta’l-Aħmar, before moving on to Pawlu Frendo il-Bożen, Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp and then Indri Brincat il-Pupa (Attard interview 2014). Feeling an attraction to Brincat’s style in particular, in the early 1990s Attard began to associate himself with kitarristi in Australia who played like him – specifically Joe Galea in Sydney and Lippu Gauchi tal-Mqabba in Melbourne – picking up techniques from them whilst continuing to listen to recordings of Brincat. In time,

80 George Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl also shared recordings of his father with Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestru, another young prim kitarrist who Aquilina feels is full of the kind of energy his father exhibited when playing (Aquilina interview 2013).
Attard became a gifted prim kitarrist with a style that today remains clearly influenced by Brincat’s.

Attard and Brincat first met when Attard visited Malta in 1999, although they had been corresponding for a number of years prior to this. They remained in contact and were good friends until Brincat’s death in 2010, having met in person twice more in the 2000s. The fact that Attard became a protégé of Brincat despite not having learned directly from him and their being separated by a vast distance played into the myth of Attard possessing a born-ability as a prim kitarrist. Although the għana community is well aware of how a student kitarrist may use recordings to inform his style, they still expressed astonishment that Attard was capable of imitating Brincat so completely. At the time of Attard’s first meeting with Brincat in 1999 he also met a young Kevin Spagnol it-Tīfel ta’ Żeppi, who was beginning to take an interest in the guitar. Spagnol was apprenticed to Brincat (in a manner that seems more fitting of a previous generation of kitarristi) through his father, Żeppi, who was a close friend of Brincat’s and a long-time akkumpanjist for him. Attard remained in contact with Spagnol after returning to Australia, sending helpful videos of him playing Brincat’s melodies slowed down and divided into shorter passages. However, this was not a novel innovation: several years earlier, Attard had himself received from Brincat a number of instructional audio cassettes in which Brincat had done exactly the same (Attard interview 2014). Throughout his career, Attard thus had access to a number of different (often simultaneous) modes of learning: observing kitarristi in the għana clubs of Sydney and Melbourne, an apprenticeship with Joe Galea, an apprenticeship with Brincat via a small number of face-to-face encounters and intermittent conversations and ‘lessons’ received from him via specially produced recordings, and learning from a range of kitarristi via commonly-circulated recordings.
Recordings play a pivotal role in these two students’ periods of self-directed learning, facilitating further encounters with significant individuals who helped deepen their musical knowledge. These relationships were established via recordings, exposing recorded media as not so disembodied from sociability as at first thought. Recordings permit a student to self-direct his learning and enable relationships to be developed with those who provide the recordings as well as with those who appear in them. Ray Attard had the luxury of being able to engage in conversation with Brincat; Frederick Mallia had no such opportunity, as Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl had long since died. However, Mallia still engaged with Aquilina by searching for tangible memorials to him: listening to his audio and video recordings, visiting his grave and talking with his son, George.

What recordings offer to a kitarrist, beyond the opportunity to develop his own style, is, perhaps even more importantly, access to the total history of prejjem. Recordings break down notions of locality and the linearity of temporality, offering the student immediate access to the entire ‘world’ of għana, past and present, local and diasporic. Through this medium he may learn regardless of whether the kitarrist he is drawn to is unwilling to assist his learning, is located in the diaspora, or is deceased. Recordings can, however, sometimes reinforce temporality. For example, as noted above, Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi was apprenticed to Indri Brincat il-Pupa toward the end of Brincat’s life. As Spagnol and his family were close to Brincat, he spent a lot of time in a semi-public sphere of learning observing and imitating Brincat in public and in each of their homes. Yet, recordings of Brincat made between the 1950s and the 2000s nonetheless featured in Spagnol’s development. These recordings provided Spagnol not only with examples of Brincat’s style as it developed over time, but also with examples of him playing during his prime – bearing in mind that Brincat was in his seventies and seen to be retiring from playing when he met Spagnol. Thus, as physical tapes lined up on a shelf Spagnol can construct a chronology of Brincat’s performances.
through time in order to understand where his style came from, where it is today, and what it might become in the future (through Spagnol’s own development of it). Listening to Brincat’s recordings is another method for Spagnol to learn from Brincat *in addition* to his physical interactions with him.

Utilising recorded media alongside face-to-face interactions is a method noted by Nasir Syed when he talks of the “Internet Guru”, with reference to sitar students using online audio and video learning resources of master musicians in north India:

[M]y devotion to Khan Sahab is not lessened by my time spent learning from the Internet Guru. In fact, I have furthered my learning from Khan Sahab immensely by watching online videos of his amazing jhala (fast right-hand rhythmic movement) ... Khan Sahab himself remarked on the unarguably brilliant form and tone of this particular online recording. (Syed 2008:103)

Equally, *prejjem* recordings are an excellent way to reinforce other modes of learning and remain useful throughout the career of a *kitarrist*. Indeed, some *kitarristi* utilise recordings of themselves to reflect on and improve their own playing (Baldacchino 1997). As I have illustrated, in cases where *kitarristi* have utilised recordings extensively in their private learning process they did not do so at the expense of continuing their learning in other spheres or environments: whilst learning privately, Ray Attard continued to visit *kitarrist* friends in homes and social clubs in Sydney and Melbourne, as did Frederick Mallia *ir-Re* in Malta. For both of these *kitarristi*, recordings broadened and deepened their knowledge of *prejjem* as much from the music encoded into them as by the relationships that were facilitated by their circulation.
Recordings, rites of passage and liminality

If we consider the learning process from the perspective of the wider ghana community instead of from the student’s viewpoint, recordings appear to facilitate a rapid and almost miraculous musical development to manifest beyond the sociability of the community. Through the medium of recordings a student can enter a liminal, private sphere of learning in which he may develop an ability that, when revealed back to the community, suggests a magical transformation has occurred. This process is akin to the ritual of a rite of passage. Viewing a prim student’s learning in these terms can help us to understand the transformative nature of stage three of my learning model.

Arnold Van Gennep defines a rite of passage as a class of ritual that marks a transition in the status and identity of an individual within his community which is produced through a ceremonial progression toward that change (Van Gennep 1909; see also Turner 1967:93-111; 1969:94-96). Conrad Kottak explains further:

All rites of passage have three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation. In the first phase [separation], people withdraw from the group and begin moving from one place or status to another. In the third phase [aggregation] they reenter society, having completed the rite. The margin phase [or the liminal phase] … is the period between states, the limbo during which people have left one place or state but haven’t yet entered or joined the next. (Kottak 1996:96)

Ranier Fsadni considers ghana spirtu pront performance as a ritual, identifying the prelude as the separation, the debate – the “main fight itself” – as the liminal stage, and the kadenza as the aggregation phase (Fsadni 1993:343). However, an ghana performance is not a rite of passage in itself; rather, becoming a competent daqqaq is. Becoming a proficient prim kitarrist affords an individual the ability to participate in the
ritual of ghana in a more central role, increasing his status within the ghana community, and in turn granting him access to more prestigious performance opportunities. The separation phase for a prim kitarrist occurs when he has acquired the ability to learn independently, having become able to learn from recordings or from observing other kitarristi at a distance. The marginal or liminal phase is his development in this private sphere of learning, away from the instructional influence of the kitarrist community of practice. The aggregation phase is his presentation of this learned material back to his community of practice and to the broad ghana community, who will recognise that a transformation of ability and status has taken place.

Of course, throughout this transformation the student will not have physically left the community or its public and semi-public learning environments (he will most likely continue to meet and play with these group(s) on a regular basis); rather, through his development into an independent learner he has created an additional space of learning for himself, the private sphere. As described above, for instance, Kevin Spagnol it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi continued to receive instruction from Indri Brincat il-Pupa alongside learning from his historic recordings. Recordings provide a student with learning opportunities that may otherwise be impossible: he might learn styles of playing from kitarristi who are deceased (thereby overcoming death) or located in the diaspora (overcoming geographic ruptures in transmission), or the style of a kitarrist who does not wish to share his techniques (overcoming social limitations), or who is alive but no longer plays or cannot play as he did decades earlier (overcoming temporality). The liminal space afforded by recordings heals these kinds of rupture in the transmission of prejjem whilst simultaneously establishing the student himself as a liminal – almost shamanistic – figure who is able to use technology to rapidly learn from and ‘interact’ with kitarristi outside of normal modes of sociability. There is certainly a magical quality to the private sphere of learning and to recordings
themselves. Recordings have a supernatural memorial capacity to bring back to life the sounds (and images) of deceased kitarristi, either via their playback or through present-day kitarristi imitating their style. Although such instances of overcoming death through technology has been accepted by the għana community for decades (so pervasive and well-used are recordings), the astonishment with which a new student is greeted when he performs in the style of a deceased master would appear to belie this knowledge.

What is peculiar to recordings over other methods of learning is the speed by which a student can develop his ability though them. Stories abound of prim kitarristi suddenly being able to play well after listening to a few recordings. According to Joe Bonello is-Skuti, Ray Attard would “improve from week to week” thanks to cassettes: one week he would play like Indri Brincat il-Pupa, the next like Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp, then Kalčidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa (Bonello interview 2013b). Frederick Mallia ir-Re would listen to recordings of Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl for hours in Raymond Schembri iċ-Ċiranu’s garage, impressing Schembri by picking up melodies within a few minutes (Schembri interview 2013). Such glimpses of a student’s rapid development of ability by established kitarristi cements and perpetuates the belief in innate talent by the kitarrist community and, on reflection, by the student himself. Paul Berliner recounts similar stories of surprise in the jazz world, describing these encounters as pivotal to the self-recognition of musical advancement by the student and the wider community (Berliner 1994:120). It is this presentational aspect that I now turn to analyse. The student’s post-liminal return to the community – his aggregation phase, where he presents the material he has learned in the private sphere of learning back to the community – informs the last two stages of my learning model.
3.4 A model of learning *prejjem*: stages four and five

Learning is a continuous, reflexive activity which, at all stages of his development, involves the *prim* or *akkumpanjist* student evaluating his presentation of learned material back to the community. As the student becomes more independent he is able to reflect more critically on his abilities and autonomously overcome his limitations, relying increasingly less on others to direct his learning. Eventually the student will develop enough ability to be recognised as an accomplished *kitarrist*. From the *kitarrist*’s perspective he continues to engage with stage three learning activities; however, due to the increasing number of performance opportunities he is afforded by his musical proficiency, there comes a point when those outside of his close *kitarristi* circle start to notice his improvement – he begins to present his ability to the wider *ghanan* community. To complete my learning model, I propose a division of this presentational aspect into two stages: (4) the initial presentation of ability at the start of one’s career, and (5) the continuing presentation of it as one’s career develops.

The divergence of learning behaviour between an *akkumpanjist* and a *prim kitarrist* that was first noted in stage three becomes more prominent in these presentational stages. Unlike a *prim kitarrist*, an *akkumpanjist* is not seen to move definitively from a predominantly learning-oriented process to a presentational one for two reasons. Firstly, advanced ability for an *akkumpanjist* is developed through sustained involvement in performance. His musical refinement is obtained by his ability to work well in an ensemble and with *ghannejja* – not competencies one can gain in private. The *akkumpanjament* tradition does not encourage virtuosity or independence, but cohesion. Secondly, because the *akkumpanjist* has no need for a private sphere of learning in which to develop his ability away from the community, his spheres of learning remain primarily public and semi-public. Thus, his musical and social engagement with the tradition remain continuous and visible throughout his career as he
moves from outsider to insider status. As such there may be no surprise ‘return’ from a private sphere of learning for an *akkumpanjist* as is encountered among many *prim kitarristi*. The distinction between the two roles is perhaps most tellingly revealed by the community’s own categorisation of musical ability. Among *akkumpanjisti* there are either average or accomplished *kitarristi*; for *prim kitarristi* there is an additional category: *kitarristi fin*, those guitarists with a ‘special touch’.\(^81\) The private sphere of learning affords a *prim kitarrist* the opportunity to attain this special status due to the magical quality of this liminal state and the speed with which he can attain musical ability through it.\(^82\) Although an *akkumpanjist* also continues to learn, present and evaluate his own playing with an increasing adeptness throughout his own stages four and five, his developments are far more subtle than those of *prim kitarristi*. Therefore, the following analysis of the presentational aspect of my learning model focuses on the *prim* student only.

**Stage four: the initial presentation of musical knowledge**

The initial presentation of a *kitarrist*’s advanced ability is difficult to define precisely, since he does not markedly disassociate himself from the community in a way that we might associate with a rite of passage in the ‘classic’ sense. Whilst engaging with a private sphere of learning the *prim* student continues to engage in social music-making; the private sphere is simply an additional environment of learning available to him. A *prim kitarrist* will gradually present what he has learned in the private sphere

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\(^81\) Herndon determines there to only be two categories of ability for *ghannejja*: excellent or boring (Herndon 1971:75). I do not agree with this assertion, however, as I find that recognition is (today, at least) clearly given to those *ghannejja* with an equivalent ‘special touch’ – despite there not being an equivalent term. As is the case for *prim kitarristi*, this is a category bestowed upon a very small number of *ghannejja*.

\(^82\) It is interesting to note that a *prim kitarrist* will never describe himself as a master among the likes of Indri Brincat il-Pupa or Karim Cardona it-Tapp; however, he may indirectly profess this status in laying claim to their legacies by suggesting that he is one of the few good *prim kitarristi* left who venerate their playing and continue to play in their style.
(from recordings and observing other kitarristi at a distance) first to his kin and close kitarristi social circles, before presenting to the wider għana community. Distant kitarristi and the wider għana community may have caught glimpses of his playing at various events, but it is only those individuals within the dashed boundary line of figure 48 (kin musicians and close kitarristi) who will have continuously observed his development from a beginner to an advanced level. The ‘surprise’ of a sudden advanced ability is therefore more surprising to the wider community than to those with a closer affiliation to him.

A key marker of stage four presentation, which is developed during stage three, is the student’s capacity to successfully imitate other prim kitarristi. This is often the root of the surprise element of a burgeoning prim kitarrist. The accurate imitation of past or present masters is perceived as the first step toward musical maturity, acquiring for the prim student a stamp of approval from the musical community that increases his status. Yet, imitation is sometimes met with scorn and even the dissolution of a mode of learning. When Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Āhmar first heard John Grima tal-Belt, a young akkumpanjist of his, imitating his prim style he was surprised and upset. Snatching the guitar from Grima and instructing him to sit further away, where he could no longer closely observe him play, Farrugia effectively cut Grima off from the partly-guided apprenticeship that he had been receiving from him up to this point of presentation (Schembri interview 2013; also Grech interview 2013b; interview 2014). Kalcidon Vella ta’ Mustaċċa, another admirer of Farrugia, became able to imitate Farrugia’s style so completely that at one event on hearing but not seeing Vella play some dilettanti assumed that it was in fact Farrugia performing (Grech interview 2013c). Farrugia resented Vella’s appropriation of his style – acquired through recordings and distant observation at performances – and appeared to hold a grudge against him for much of his life (see chapter one).
Imitating a *prim kitarrist* can therefore sometimes be perceived as stealing his style. In his study of this same issue among communities of jazz musicians, Berliner suggests that this reveals concerns over legacies and economies: of “imitators deliberately or inadvertently taking credit for musical ideas not original with them, or exhausting the professional jobs their mentors might otherwise have acquired” (Berliner 1994:121). Farrugia was happy to play with Grima until Grima became able to imitate his style, at which point Farrugia severed their association (Grech interview 2014). In another example, George Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* has carefully restricted access to his father’s recordings in an attempt to protect his stylistic legacy. On the other hand, Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* actively encouraged Kevin Spagnol *it-Tifel ta’ Żeppi* and Ray Attard to imitate his style, teaching Spagnol in person and sending Attard instructional tape recordings. Spagnol continues to play in a style that is extraordinarily similar to Brincat’s. However, Brincat began to take this pedagogical approach in the 1990s, at a time when he was gradually retiring from public performance (and so from paid engagements). Thus, by mentoring a small number of *kitarristi* in his style of playing, Brincat could be seen to be cementing his legacy – as did Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp* by mentoring the teenage Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl* towards the end of his own life. It would appear that imitation is accepted by masters when learning has occurred through more direct, pedagogical modes, as in the case of Brincat and Spagnol, but not so readily if the style has been acquired without the explicit awareness of the master, such as through distant observation or from recordings.

As suggested in chapter two, most *prim kitarristi* today are not regarded as being in the same elite class as *kitarristi fin* such as Indri Brincat *il-Pupa*, Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*, Żeppi Farrugia *ta’ l-Ahmar*, Karmnu Aquilina *Nofs il-Lejl*, Grezzju Ellul *ta’ Ċanċa*, Ġużeppi Ellul *Taaqalla*, Ġanni Pace *l-Artist*, Pawlu Frendo *il-Bożen*, Pepi Pulo *ta’ Frawla*, Ġużeppi Xerri *it-Toto*, or Lippu Gauchi *tal-Mqabba*. Today’s *prim kitarristi*,
on the whole, synthesise their styles from these masters rather than develop something entirely new. However, young kitarristi such as Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestru, Frederick Mallia ir-Re and Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ do have their own styles which are nonetheless subtly different from those of past masters. Whilst the styles that student prim kitarrassi initially present to the community in stage four are typically derivative, there is also an understanding that this represents the beginning of a student’s career as a prim kitarrist, after which he will be expected to develop his own unique, personal style – stage five.

**Stage five: the continuing presentation of musical knowledge**

In this final stage of learning the student continues to present, evaluate and mature his own unique style throughout his career. This is a slow process which unfolds over many years, often involving periods where the student imitates a number of prim kitarrassi’s styles to mine them for appealing traits. During stage four accurate imitation is key, whereas stage five sees the student develop his own style by experimenting with distinctive combinations of speed, intensity, dynamics, timbre, ornamentation, centonisation and melodic fragmentation (as discussed in chapter two). However, as also detailed in chapter two, there are some stylistic traits that should not be mixed. Therefore, one tends to find kitarristi today following in the broad style of either Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp, Indri Brincat il-Pupa or Żeppi Farrugia ta’ l-Aħmar. A unique style is carved out by the student within one of these three aesthetic schools. If a kitarrist is drawn to the style of a particular prim kitarrist he may follow his stylistic lineage up or down and take influence from individuals within that school. For example, John Grima tal-Belt claims his primary influence to be Pawlu Frendo il-Bożen, who was a student of Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp. Frederick Mallia ir-Re was influenced by Karmnu Aquilina Nofs il-Lejl, another student of Cardona. Frendo and Aquilina’s shared
musical heritage, via Cardona, means that Grima and Mallia share an undercurrent of stylistic traits – a compatible musical aesthetic – which no doubt facilitated the relationship between the two when Mallia was learning prejjem.

During stage five of my learning model, as in stage four, elements of stage three learning continue to be engaged with by the student, namely the continued importance of the private sphere of learning. A prim kitarrist may change his style of playing throughout his career as he associates with other kitarristi or as new, old, or diasporic recordings come to his attention. He continuously develops his style by learning, presenting and evaluating his musical ability within the framework of the kitarrist community of practice and the wider ġhana community.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have proposed a five-stage model for learning the musical knowledge which enables the production of prejjem and the behavioural norms that facilitate its transmission. Permeating this structure are three spheres of learning – public, semi-public and private – employed by the student to gain knowledge in particular aspects of the tradition. These social-situational spheres are determined by the relationship between the student and the transmitter(s), and the situational contexts in which these relationships are negotiated. When applied to different learning contexts in each stage of my model, each of these spheres elicits particular “building blocks” of knowledge to be transmitted. It is through these spheres that the five stages of learning are engaged with. The environments where knowledge transmission take place provide the fixed, physical spaces within which these stages of learning can be interacted with through spheres of learning, but it is those individuals present (or not present) and their relationships with the student who will determine the mode of transmission that will occur at a given moment. Each of the first three stages of learning stress one of these
spheres of learning: stage one is dominated by a public sphere of learning via enculturation, stage two emphasises a semi-public sphere that highlights self-conscious, partly-guided learning processes, and stage three introduces a private sphere that takes the student on an independent, self-directed path of learning. Stages four and five shift between semi-public and private spheres of learning. Stage four represents conscious evaluative presentations of musical (and social) abilities during the early phases of a student’s musical independence, and then throughout his career as stage five.

A student begins his involvement in the ghana community at its periphery, following an increasingly focused trajectory through his chosen community of practice, forging strategic friendships and gaining knowledge as he moves through it – what Lave and Wenger determine as a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 1991). Whilst deepening his involvement in a specific community of practice, a student kitarrist simultaneously builds relationships with the wider ghana community by involving himself in the sociability of the community. My learning model is not intended as a prescriptive one; rather, it is useful as an analytic tool to comprehend the variety of learning methods available to a student. Key to this model is the distinction between learning and presenting material. This is not a neat division, where one category precedes the other. A student presents his knowledge back to the community as soon as he begins to engage with it in stage one, but it is evident that he presents different material to individuals positioned at different social distances from him. These presentations are regulated as much through the student’s own personal choice over whom to associate with as through the performance opportunities afforded to him by the ghana community at various stages of his musical development. Equally, a master prim kitarrist will be aware of the appropriate contexts in which to present certain material. Among close kitarrist friends he may take the opportunity to ‘practice’ or experiment with style and structure, whereas he may be more restrained at public ghana spirtu
pronounced occasions. Conversely, he might choose to play exceptionally well at a public event in order to intimidate a rival prim kitarrist who is present (Attard interview 2014).

Conceiving the learning process as being engaged with via the interface of spheres of learning has revealed an important distinction between an akkumpanjist and a prim kitarrist: while an akkumpanjist can utilise public and semi-public spheres of learning, a prim kitarrist has access to an additional, private sphere of learning. This sphere is a manifestation of advanced self-directed learning; of independent development occurring conceptually within, yet spatially outside of, the kitarrist community of practice. This liminal space – which, as I have illustrated, is engaged with throughout the career of a prim kitarrist from stage three onwards – increases the impact of a prim student’s presentational ‘return’, as well as offering him a greatly increased knowledge base from which to learn material independent from face-to-face means. The private sphere, provided principally by recordings but also through a prim kitarrist’s skill at observation and imitation, is not available to the akkumpanjist as the nature of his practice does not require such development. This goes some way to explain the particular prestige bestowed by the ghana community upon prim kitariisti which is not extended to akkumpanjisti. Improvisation is, after all, the most prized skill in the ghana community – an activity that is engaged in by ghannejja and prim kitarristi, but not by akkumpanjisti. Ultimately, the ability to improvise prejjem is developed in a private sphere of learning, a domain which exists beyond the kitarrist community of practice and the ghana community. This liminal space would appear to subvert the fundamental face-to-face sociability that holds the ghana community together; however, it is in fact found to be a critical component in the transmission of prejjem that can, in many cases, lead to even more rewarding face-to-face interactions.
CHAPTER FOUR

Transmitting sociability: negotiating community identities through performance
So far in this thesis I have considered the *prejjem* tradition in terms of production processes: in chapter one I examined how the Maltese guitar is constructed as a physical and symbolic object, in chapter two I analysed the musical norms of the tradition and the impact that significant *kitarristi* have had on instigating changes, and in chapter three I identified the methods by which a student *kitarrist* learns *prejjem* and involves himself in community activities. In this chapter I instead focus on how *ghana* and *prejjem* are consumed by the *ghana* community. I examine how the physical contexts in which *ghana* and *prejjem* are enacted impact performance norms and sociability within the community, and how individual and collective identities are formed and transmitted through such performance occasions. I draw particular attention in this chapter to diasporic performance contexts and the methods of communication that exist between Maltese and Maltese-Australian *ghana* communities.

Throughout this thesis I have underscored how sociability impacts the transmission of objects and ideas between informed members of the *ghana* community; however, I have not yet taken into account how the sociability of *ghana*’s audience shapes the transmission of such material. In chapter three I presented the *ghana* community as a composite of communities of practice, comprised of those who perform, facilitate or otherwise enable performances, and a general audience who consume their product. For this chapter, in which I am not focusing on the transmission of musical material between *daqqaja* exclusively, dividing the community into producers who create and present and consumers who receive and evaluate is unsuitable. The audience – those individuals who in the moment of performance are not participating as *daqqaja* – in fact have a great deal of power to direct what aspects of the *ghana* tradition as a musical and social experience are transmitted during a performance occasion. My model must now change to reflect the meaning of the total performance, not just certain aspects of it. Christopher Small urges us to consider each
performance as a unique convergence of musical and social processes that result from
encounters between human beings: “What does it mean when this performance ... takes
place at this time, in this place, with these participants?” (Small 1998:10). For Small,

The fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical
works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what
people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its
nature and the function it fulfils in human life. (ibid.:8)

Considering daqqqaqa and their audience as equal producers and consumers of a
performance occasion presents us with a more even playing field upon which to
examine these issues.

Those individuals who are present at an ghana performance invest in the ghana
community in an almost infinite variety of ways. Each member of the community has an
individual identity that is uniquely formed at the confluence of a series of referents
personal to them: one’s depth of involvement with the tradition, one’s role in its
performances, one’s personal history, whether one is located in Malta or its diaspora,
one’s gender. Therefore, even though members of ghana communities dispersed around
the globe share a common body of symbols relating to the performance event and its
modes of socialisation, individual orientations toward these symbols are not uniform
(after Cohen 1998). Yet, it is the very notion of a community formed of shared
commonalities – the idea of a collective identity – that is attractive to its members.
Ultimately, the aim of any community organisation or formation is, as Anne-Marie
Fortier identifies, “to create a thread of continuity that will hem in the differences and
resolve, even if temporarily, the indeterminacy of ... identity” (Fortier 2000:158-159).
Determining the constitution of the ghana community and examining the interactions
between its members in specific performance situations reveals a great deal to us about how attitudes toward Maltese identity and sociability are embedded in, and transmitted through, performances of ġhana and prejjem.

In section 4.1 of this chapter I consider the nature of the communities which form around performances of ġhana in Malta and Australia by drawing insights from four key texts: Thomas Turino’s *Music as social life* (2008), Gregory Bateson’s work on framing (1987), Christopher Small’s *Musicking* (1998), and Kay Shelemay’s musical and descent communities (2011). I synthesise these concepts in section 4.2 to investigate how three examples of ġhana spirtu pront performances in Malta and Australia have been affected by their audience’s constitution, participation and orientation toward the spaces in which they are enacted. In doing so, I reveal how particular aspects of ġhana are transmitted within particular environments and, in turn, how these environments and their associated modes of sociability are encoded in and transmitted through ġhana. Section 4.3 extends this analysis into the realm of recorded media, examining how audio-visual recordings that are shared between diasporic daqqaqta create and sustain a transnational ġhana community whose members attempt to emulate the social transactions found in physical, face-to-face performance contexts.
4.1 Forming communities around ghana

Ghana as a presentational performance

Thomas Turino (2008) divides real-time, live performances into participatory and presentational “social fields” of practice (after Pierre Bourdieu 1984). These social fields or performance domains are defined by the purpose and goals of the activity being engaged in and the power relations and types of capital that determine the role relationships, social positioning and status of actors within that particular field (Turino 2008:25-26). For Turino:

Participatory performance is a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role. Presentational performance, in contrast, refers to situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing. (ibid.:26)

Turino’s focus, then, is not on categorising performances by genre or style, but by “the types of activity, artistic roles, values, goals, and people involved in specific instances of music making” – factors that are ultimately shaped by the “ideologies and contexts of reception” (ibid.:27).

Applying Turino’s summary distinctions between participatory and presentational practices (ibid.:90) to ghana, a number of key performance characteristics can be determined that reveal its nature as a predominantly presentational
activity with some participatory elements. Fundamental artist-audience distinctions are always present in *ghana*, insofar as there are groups of individuals within the community who can create *ghana* as a musical activity (ghannejja and kitarristi) and those who cannot (the general audience, dilettanti and oganajżers). Due in part to its complexity and partly to its rules of engagement, *ghana* does not encourage spontaneous participation by an uninitiated audience. To sing or play the guitar infers that one has spent time in a community of practice honing these skills. The focus of a daqqaq during a performance is very much on himself and his interaction with the ensemble; his attention is directed inward, on the act of doing more so than toward an audience.

Artist-audience distinctions are not, however, determined solely by one’s performative role. During a performance, artists and their performance space are distinguished from the audience’s by physical markers visually encoded in the venue: a stage, a guitar, microphones and cameras (if the performance is being recorded), and complimentary food and drinks. Outside of the frame of performance, daqqaqa share the same seating, tables, bathroom and bar (paying for their own food and drink) as everyone else. The stage, the space to which all of the performance markers ultimately point, is a space through which an individual is transformed into an artist and is temporarily afforded the tangible and intangible privileges that this role offers. The stage itself may be an elevated platform or simply an area marked out by chairs. Whatever form it takes, it provides a focus for attention. At formal events the daqqaqa almost always face toward the audience in two straight rows, the ghannejja standing in a row behind the seated kitarristi. At informal gatherings, or on occasion after more formal events, daqqaqa may instead cluster around a table or chairs to sing and play,

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83 Turino determines a fusion of the two as being commonplace in many traditions, although one or the other is ultimately emphasised (Turino 2008:55).
sitting or standing, facing each other in a loose arrangement. Yet, even in these instances there are still role distinctions. Although an audience very often includes potential participants in the form of daqqaqa who are either waiting their turn to perform or are abstaining through choice or circumstance, in all but the most informal of occasions they will not join in with a performance once it has begun. All those who are not performing, whether they are themselves daqqaqa or audience members, are expected to remain silent throughout and appear impartial to the unfolding events (this, at least, is the ideal).  

However, categorising artists and audiences by their activities during a performance divides a community by their primary performance roles: as producers of music (daqqaqa), facilitators of performance (oganajżers), informed consumers (dilettanti), and general consumers (general audience). As this chapter will reveal, such divisive distinctions within the community are not in fact the case; boundaries are quite fluid, at least conceptually. Producers do not create independently from the influence of non-producers as they are all members of the same broad community. Furthermore, the audience do not passively consume these performances. What we see instead – particularly in ġhana spirtu pront, which I shall focus on in the first two sections of this chapter – is something of a participatory performance shrouded in the form of a presentational one. The performers, as community members themselves, are aware of the particular issues of sociability, identity and collectivity that concern them and their local community. Through the frame of presentational performance they articulate and negotiate these concerns on behalf of their audience in a safe, performative context outside of the everyday. Physical markers that may be symbolic of these concerns are

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84 In reality, noise from an audience is often at constant risk of bubbling over and disrupting the ġhana performance. Such aural intrusions elicit constant hisses and calls for quiet from those more invested in the performance. However, rather than being a demonstration of disinterest, I believe such behaviour is part of the play of performance – an audience’s antagonism and the musical community’s attempts at containment mirrors the repartee of ġhana spirtu pront between a pair of ġhannejja.
often located within the performance space, increasing in visibility and significance during the heightened emotional frame of performance.

**Framing the experience of ghana**

“Framing” is essentially the symbolic conceptual framework by which a “particular slice of experience” (Turino 2008:236) (in this case an event) is interpreted by its practitioners and observers, in which one recognises markers, symbols and actors as indicators of a specific type of activity that is to be understood in a specific way, or number of ways. Because the frame organises the perception of the viewer, Gregory Bateson suggests that the frame itself is also involved in the evaluation of the messages which it contains: employing an analogy, “[t]he picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame” (Bateson 1987:193). The frame is simultaneously visible and invisible; it must be ignored for the event within it to be effective, but its presence must be acknowledged in order to mark out the event as apart from everyday reality.

_Ghana can be psychologically framed as “play” – certainly so the verbal duels of ghana spirtu pront. In play, “the messages or signals exchanged … are in a certain sense untrue or not meant” (ibid.:188-189). Framing ghana spirtu pront encounters as play places such potentially destructive behaviour outside the realm of everyday life by marking them off as special events. For those engaging with a performance of ghana spirtu pront, these exchanges permit a regulated, cathartic release of tension within a safe environment that has been prepared for the act. The performance spaces and those individuals within it are common to everyday sociability, but the frame of play “brings into being something that had not existed before by changing the shape and positioning of boundaries that categorize phenomena and so alter their meaning” (Handelman
Transferring Bateson’s analogy of animals engaging in play, a confrontational verbal exchange in *ghanja spiritu pront* is a “playful nip”; a nip that is denotative of a bite, but which does not in fact denote what would be denoted by the bite (Bateson 1987:186). The nip is an abstraction of aggressive behaviour. When an *ghannej* encourages his opponent to enter into play with a provocative comment (supplemented by the metaphorical wink implied by the framing of the event as play), it is not the same as making a slanderous statement or throwing a punch (a bite). A physical or metaphoric punch denotes much more and would require a different kind of framing. The “bite” does not, or rather should not, occur in *ghan*; there are rules in place, policed by its practitioners, to maintain correct behaviour. When a transgression of the rules of engagement does occur, the offending *ghannej* receives a reprimand from within the *ghan* community which may include him being excluded from certain performance occasions for a time. Encounters within the frame of *ghan* that have gone beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour or have spilled over into fights are recounted with distaste by *dilettanti*. Recordings of such occasions have in many cases been censored or destroyed by mutual agreement. It is important to the community that activity framed within the boundaries of performance is regarded as play and that ill-feeling does not spill over into everyday life. As Bateson suggests in an analogy with a game of poker, losses within its frame must be accepted as part of the game itself (ibid.: 188). However, a loss of financial capital during poker does transfer to the realm outside of the game. The same is true of *ghan*, where reputations and relationships that exist beyond the frame of the event can be made and broken during the play of performance.

85 For example, in performance one should not draw attention to physical defects, private family matters, or use potentially slanderous knowledge about the everyday activities of one’s opponent (although these all do inevitably occur to some extent) (see Herndon 1971:44-52; also Mifsud Chircop 2004:161-162).

86 I am currently aware of a number of *ghannejja* who refuse to sing with one another due to grievances. Rather than engage in provocative behaviour in performance, these *ghannejja* instead refrain from duelling together out of respect for the tradition and the community.
The paradoxical seriousness of the play of *ghana spirtu pront* is perhaps best revealed by the fact that I have never encountered close male family members singing *ghana spirtu pront* against one another. Antagonising sacrosanct familial bonds in Maltese society is a risk that is apparently not worth taking. Yet, the ever-present risk of transgressing from play into reality – Bateson’s suggestive “clenched fist of threat” (ibid.:186) – is part of the excitement of experiencing *ghana*. Kevin Bradley characterises *ghana spirtu pront* as a performance of social risk, “a contest in which the participants deploy strategies designed to increase their status, but which include the possibility of failure” (Bradley 2002:16). It is the performance of this kind of risk in a public setting that McLeod and Herndon ascertain as central to an audience’s appreciation of *ghana*:

The presence of the risk of failure in a performance implies, as well, the possibility of its opposite – transcendence. When something is so difficult to accomplish that an ordinary person may, in the course of its performance, come totally apart, this invites close attention on the part of the audience, provoking great interest in the activity. (McLeod and Herndon 1980:153)

Yet this risk, whilst palpable, is readily framed as play – *ghana* performance, after all, is ostensibly about entertainment.

For Turino, a frame is comprised of both physical and conceptual components. Turino’s presentational frame is typically cued by a stage, microphones, lights and instruments (Turino 2008:52) – physical artefacts that not only distinguish artists from audience, but which are also ritualistic objects that signify performance. The

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87 However, husband and wife pairings are sometimes encountered in *ghana spirtu pront*. During these light hearted, often comic sessions, the man usually takes the role of a hen-pecked husband.
performance venue itself also contributes to the physical frame. *Ghana* is almost always found incorporated into pre-existing environments and occasions of sociability, often in venues that practitioners visit regularly outside of performance contexts. Everyday utilitarian spaces such as homes, garages, bars and clubs are intimate spaces already loaded with enactments and expectations of ‘Maltese’ sociability which contribute significantly to the framing and interpretation of *ghana* performance. The body of social values and concerns that these spaces bear in their physical and conceptual construction – how one negotiates his or her identity in terms of home, diaspora, family, friendship, masculinity, rivalry, gossip, nostalgia, what it means to be Maltese – underpin the ideologies, imagery and expectations which frame and guide the interpretation of the performances within them (ibid.:64).

I would argue, then, that the physical frame of an *ghana* performance is comprised of the type of *ghana* performance being manifested (*spirtu pront, fatt, fil-gholi* and *prejjem* each manifest a different organisation of performers and performance spaces), the physical environment it is being enacted in (a home, a bar, a *festa*), and the individuals present for it (close family, extended family, friends, general public). The conceptual or ideological component of this frame is developed on an individual basis in relation to one’s orientation toward these physical markers as symbols of ‘Malteseness’, and one’s attachment to the collectivity that shares them. The frame is therefore dynamically (re)created by each individual upon each performance, depending on the unique convergence of these criteria. However, one’s individual orientation toward a symbol may also be informed by collective orientations within a particular performance context. For example, a *fatt* narrating the experience of an emigrant that is performed in a private home in Australia is understood by members of the Maltese-Australian emigrant generation in a particularly intimate way, but not so by their children or grandchildren. The same *fatt* performed in Malta is equally unlikely to have
the same impact, as the frame of performance – not the content of the ballad, but the audience, the location and a different convergence of histories and experiences – is different again for that audience. An emigration *fatt* is a symbol of collective experience, but individual responses to it are ultimately constructed and applied based on the unique personal history of the observer. Much as a community is fundamentally comprised of individuals who hold a set of symbols in common but not necessarily their meanings (Cohen 1998:20), the framing of an event by each individual present for it is unique to their emotional and psychological orientation toward it.

**Musicking**

This leads me to consider Christopher Small’s theory of “musicking”, which takes a comprehensive approach to participating in a musical event:

> To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. (Small 1998:9)

This conceptualisation of music-making focuses our attention on the human relationships and activities that enable a performance event, more so than on the musical sounds themselves (ibid.:8). Every individual who is present at an event contributes to it and bears a degree of responsibility for its enactment; all of their combined activities “add up to a single event, whose nature is affected by the ways in which all of them are carried out” (ibid.:10). The theory of musicking affords an illuminating perspective on how *ghana* is framed at each occasion and how the relationships between musickers ultimately affect how the performers manifest their performance.
Certainly, as Small states, “the act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships” (ibid.:13), but I contend that the inverse is also true, that relationships already present within (or inferred by) the performance environment are confirmed through the act of musicking. In the first chapter of his book, Small describes how a modern concert hall is designed to house and influence certain aspects of human behaviour and relationships that are suited to the established norms of producing and consuming western art music. The architecture and design of such venues impose ideal patterns of behaviour upon its occupants and the activities that are enacted by them. Aside from national festivals, ghana does not utilise purpose-built environments set aside for it (either as performance spaces, learning spaces, or rehearsal spaces for professional performances). All of its performances occur within spaces that are primarily used for other activities and which sustain a number of different forms of sociability: bars, clubs, homes, festi, even churches. I submit that each of these venues, or types of venue, encourages the transferral of certain types of relationships and behaviours from the primary social function of that venue into the performance of ghana. The relative intimacy of each venue in regard to the relationships that are fostered within its space directs the nature of each performance of ghana; and ghana, in turn, reciprocally confirms and sustains these relationships.

To expound a little on the correlation between relationships and physical spaces during the act of musicking, ghana spirtu pront is a performance of a particular type of antagonistic behaviour that exists within certain everyday environments – namely those that foster male sociability. Enacting ‘threatening’ behaviour in spaces of safety, in venues which host everyday encounters of friendly sociability, permits the transference of this safety to the performance of ghana via the disconnect afforded by the frame of play. More public duels at festi or outdoor events, where those outside of the ghana community can also listen, typically feature more sanitised, predictable arguments. That
is not to say these events have lesser value, they are simply directed at an audience who is engaging in a different way. Certainly ‘safety’ is an issue that permeates all performances of ghana, in which privacy, insider-hood and the ability to engage in social activities away from the gaze of others (whoever those others may be) are important concerns. The intimacy of a venue and its constituent relationships can also manifest itself in revealing ways during performances. For example, a particularly intimate environment might encourage the engagement of female singers, the performance of certain subgenres which might otherwise be marginalised, or it may break up the formal physical arrangement of performers. Venue and modes of sociability can dramatically affect a performance and its content.

To interpret what ghana means to those who participate in its performances, and how these meanings may affect what is transmitted and how, we need to ask a number of questions: we must determine why people are in the performance space in the first place, how they are engaged in musicking together, and how their arrangement within these spaces might reveal something of their community formations. The following three examples of ghana spiritu pront performances from Malta and Australia evidence how a community organises itself around ghana as a performance activity, allowing us to consider the bonds which are formed or confirmed between groups of individuals who music together. Following Small’s encouragement to use Gregory Bateson’s approach of “double reciprocal questioning” – a complementary pairing of questions whose answers often provide greater depth than either question asked individually (Small 1998:51) – I am asking: how is ghana transmitted by the community, and how is community transmitted by ghana?
4.2 Three case studies of musicking

In the following case studies I have refrained from describing the musical aspect of each occasion in much detail, focusing instead on the performance space, the individuals in attendance and their manner of musicking together. All three examples are of a type of performance known as a *serata*, an evening occasion that has been organised in advance to guarantee the services of *daqqaqa* and the presence of a good sized audience. The *serata* is described by McLeod and Herndon as “the most traditional form” of musical occasion in Malta which can encompass a wide range of formalities, settings, audience types and performer abilities (McLeod and Herndon 1980:155). All three occasions I describe feature a performance of *għana spirtu pront*, the most common subgenre of *għana*. By establishing a common musical style (and one which draws the broadest range of participants) I can reveal how the rules and aesthetics of this form are adapted to suit the context in which it is performed.88 Each of these examples is quite typical of a certain kind of occasion or setting: Johnny’s Bar in Żejtun is similar in appearance and function to the countless Maltese village bars that act as centres for male sociability and *għana* performances; Klabb Ghannejja Maltin is typical of the larger venues that have been set up over the past forty years in Australia as meeting places for diasporic Maltese communities; and the Maltese-Australian house party is a private, domestic event in which *daqqaqa* and their families are invited to one another’s homes to play music and socialise together.89

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88 As noted in chapter two, McLeod and Herndon count fifty-one such rules for *għana* (McLeod and Herndon 1980). Their study also considers how the musical components of *għana spirtu pront* transform in different performance contexts, although their focus is on the impact that the presence of a tape recorder, women, alcohol and *dilettanti* have on the type of material that is performed.

89 Of course, not every house party in the Maltese community involves *għana*, but those hosted by a *daqqaq* or *dilettanti* often do.
Case study 1: *serata* at Johnny’s Bar, Żejtun, Malta, 10th October 2013

Johnny’s Bar, named for its owner John Farrugia, is the local name for the Trust Pub in Żejtun, one of the town’s three bars that regularly host *għana*. The establishment consists of one ground-floor room, around thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide (see figure 51). Lining the right-hand wall are six small tables surrounded by a few low stools and chairs. The bar, with a number of tall stools arranged along its length, takes up almost the full width of the far end of the room. A pool table, its playing surface covered by a sheet of plywood when not in use, takes up a large amount of space directly in front of the bar. Two televisions are mounted on the left hand wall, one above where the *daqqaqa* stand to perform and another by the door. An old jukebox sits near the bar alongside a newer stereo, a large cigarette machine is positioned by the door, and various objects adorn the walls – a rack of pool cues, a chequerboard, an African mask, posters of Scarface and 50 Cent. Although the bar appears to be open every day, *għana* is only performed here a couple of times a week; at other times the venue attracts a range of patrons, sometimes including local *daqqaqa*.

I arrive at Johnny’s Bar around 7.15pm, whereupon I bump into *kitarrist* Salvu Tanti *il-Kanadiż* leaning against his car outside. After a chat we enter the bar and sit with some *kitarrist* friends. Both of the televisions are on; the one showing a sports roundup show is muted, but the other, tuned to a local news channel, is audible. The front doors of the bar are wide open. Later in the evening many will stand outside drinking and smoking in groups whilst listening to the *għana* emanating from within the bar. A number of *daqqaqa* and their friends who are local to Żejtun begin to arrive. The bar soon becomes busy and noise levels increase as loud conversations, laughter and the sound of clinking bottles fill the air. Eventually there are a dozen *daqqaqa* and around twenty-five non-musicians present. Their ages range between twenty and eighty, although the majority are middle aged. Among the patrons are two women: one is
Farrugia’s wife and the other is the mother of a very young girl and a boy who are also present. Anthony Zammit il-Luzzu, a dilettant who regularly films ghana events, begins to set up his video camera, tripod and lighting. He will record the event and later sell the DVDs for a few Euros a piece. The daqqaqa who perform may receive copies for free or at-cost of the disc. The bar is getting warm; the small fans on the wall are barely moving the hazy, smoky air.

Fig. 51. Plan of Johnny’s Bar, Żejtun, Malta.
When all three kitarristi who have been contracted for the evening are present they go outside into the street to tune up – it is too noisy to do so indoors. As I stand talking with them, Grezzu Dalli il-Garrawa joins us. In addition to singing ghana spirtu pront, Dalli is renowned for his comic makjetti songs. He picks up one of the guitars and accompanies himself singing a makjetta made famous by the ghannej John Laus il-Lajżer. Moments later, Ionut Mifsud it-Tifel ta’ Vestru and Tanti pick up their guitars and join in playing. After Dalli finishes we shuffle back into the bar and sit down. Over the next ten minutes Frans Mifsud ta’ Vestru, a well respected ghannej and Ionut’s father, taps other ghannejja on their shoulders, encouraging them to move toward the stage area to begin. He is placated for a few moments with a wave of a hand or a nod, before the ghannejja return to their drinks and conversation. Seeing this is not working, Mifsud taps his son on the shoulder. Ionut, the prim kitarrist for the evening, takes his guitar and sits down in the stage area, followed by Frans. Seeing this, the other daqqaqa follow suit. The stage itself is simply a clear space by a wall with three chairs arranged for the kitarristi.

The first performance of ghana spirtu pront begins at 8.15pm. Facing Zammit’s camera, six ghannejja stand in a row behind the three seated kitarristi. As the guitars begin, the audience hushes itself to a quiet murmur. Almost everyone in the room is engaged in listening, certainly at the start, but the attention of some wanes as the session unfolds. Dilettanti in the audience remain engrossed until a good line is delivered, whereby one might nudge his neighbour and smile, or perhaps gracefully wave a hand as an ghannej delivers a melismatic kisra. Other audience members talk quietly amongst themselves, move to the bar for drinks, or head outside for a cigarette and to talk more easily. Frequent hisses and shushes emanate from some of the dilettanti in the audience, from one or two of the ghannejja, and from Zammit who has to contend not only with background noise interfering with his recording, but also people ducking their heads as
they pass by his camera to reach the bar. *Ghannejja* signal for drinks during each other’s verses, sometimes breaking formation to pour them, light a cigarette, or make a dash to the toilet. Unusually, the *ghannejja* tonight do not face a large proportion of their audience, who are seated nearer to the door. Instead, they sing across the pool table toward the opposite wall, along which is positioned the video camera and a number of people gathered near the bar. Some of these individuals are *dilettanti* or are *daqqaqa* who are not currently participating, others are close friends of Farrugia, the barman.

As the last vocal *kadenza* is delivered food appears on the pool table in front of the *daqqaqa*. The audience become increasingly restless as the session draws to a close, eliciting yet more hisses from those who wish to see it finished appropriately. During the final *prejjem kadenza*, the *ghannejja* shake hands with each other and fidget as they wait for the *kitarristi* to finish. After the final guitar chords and a few seconds of applause, the *daqqaqa* begin to eat the food that has been placed on the pool table for them – a platter of olives, fried rabbit, snails, *gbejniet* (cheese) and *pastizzi* (savoury pastries). These, along with the drinks served to them during the performance, are provided to the *daqqaqa* free of charge. After a fifteen-minute break, at 9.30pm the second hour-long session of *ghana spirtu pront* begins. Six different *ghannejja* sing, although the *kitarristi* remain the same. By the end, attention from the audience is noticeably diminishing. After this second session concludes the *kitarristi* expect the evening to be over, but Farrugia implores them to play one more session as there are still some *ghannejja* who would like to sing. This third, shorter session of *ghana spirtu pront* begins at 10.45pm. It is intimated to me that some of the singers in this session are not of a very high standard. Mifsud’s *prim* playing is noticeably more reserved this time and he yawns once or twice; the *kitarristi* are evidently tiring. At the end of this session, around 11.30pm, everyone disbands for home.
Case study 2: *serata* at Klabb Ghannejja Maltin, St. Albans, Melbourne, Australia, 7th February 2014

Klabb Ghannejja Maltin (Maltese Folksingers Club) is a Maltese social club formed in Melbourne in 1983 to organise social events for local daqqaqa and their families. Its roots lie in the informal gatherings held in the home of the Klabb’s first president, Manwel Sultana *il-Moni*, in the late 1950s. From the 1960s other venues with Maltese affiliations across Melbourne were hired for larger events. By 2001 the organisation had built its own present premises in the St Albans suburb of Melbourne (see Agius 2001:298-299). Today, around ten percent of the club’s four-hundred members are active daqqaqa, the rest comprise their families and other Maltese with an attachment to this community. Klabb Ghannejja Maltin is one of two Maltese clubs in the western suburbs of Melbourne in which *ghana* is performed on a weekly basis, the other being the Maltese Culture Centre in Albion (MCCA).

Klabb Ghannejja Maltin is a large building set on a spacious plot of land. A kitchen, a number of side rooms, a separate bar and an outdoor patio complement a large main hall of around forty feet by forty (figure 52). In the hall a permanent raised stage, about twenty centimetres high, is positioned along one wall, in front of which a large motif of an acoustic guitar is inlaid into the floor in black and white marble. Memorabilia of *ghana* and Malta are found throughout the establishment: on the walls are old photographs of *ghannejja* from Malta and Australia and ornate plaques commemorating their deaths, photographs of iconic locations in Malta, a decorated cartwheel, a Rediffusion radio, a model of a Maltese balcony, and several guitars made by Indri Brincat *il-Pupa*, Crispin Attard and Pinu Baldacchino. Some of these guitars and a collection of audio and video recordings have been donated by Charlie Mangion *iż-Żubina*, an *oganajżer* and dilettant in Malta. The club opens at specific times of the week for regular events – *ghana* on Friday evenings and a social evening on Tuesdays –
and occasionally hosts social dances or celebrations for members of the community. The main hall can comfortably seat 150 around a number of large tables. The serati held every Friday draw the most attendees, at which a good meal is offered. Steak and vegetables, and fish and chips are provided alongside more traditional Maltese dishes, such as ross il-forn (baked rice) and imqarrun il-forn (baked macaroni). The popular Maltese lager Ċisk and the soft drink Kinnie are served in the bar.

![Plan of the main hall at Klabb Ghannejja Maltin, Melbourne, Australia.](image)

This evening there is a typical turnout of one hundred, of which around twenty are daqqaqa. A handful of attendees are in their thirties and under, a few are in their forties, but the majority are aged over fifty. Three or four young children who are related to some of the daqqaqa are also present. A relatively large proportion of the audience is female – perhaps as much as forty per cent. On non-ghana evenings, such as
the Tuesday socials, there are often more women in attendance than men. On this occasion, as is typical for these Friday serati, many of the women are seated together around the tables at the back and sides of the hall. The two tables positioned a couple of feet from the side of the stage (marked 1 and 2 in figure 52) are occupied by ghannejja, dilettanti, their close friends and those involved in the affairs of the club. These individuals also happen to be very close to the bar, which is accessed through the doorway next to table 1. Wives of daqqaqa often sit near the front, to one side (many sit on table 3). It is pointed out to me that many who attend the club tend to sit around tables according to their village of origin. Although not a prescriptive seating plan (as people do move around), a number of individuals originally from Gozo are often found to occupy table 4, those from Żabbar table 5, and those from Rabat tables 6 and 7. The stage itself is around fifteen feet from the first row of circular tables. This ‘buffer zone’ facilitates movement through the spacious hall, but creates a degree of distance between the performers and the greater body of audience. A similar gulf is also encountered at the MCCA. Although such a space is often found in front of daqqaqa in Maltese bars, it is rarely as large as in Australia. It must be noted, however, that Maltese venues very rarely have such an abundance of space as do these Maltese-Australian clubs.

A hive of activity is found in a back room adjacent to the club’s office, well away from the main hall. It is in here that daqqaqa assemble half an hour before the first session commences, chiefly to tune up their guitars but also to chat. Tuning may take a quarter of an hour or more. This room is primarily the kitarristi’s private space; ghannejja may frequent it, but they recognise that opportunities to participate in musicking here are limited. Sometimes a few stanzas are exchanged between ghannejja or kitarristi who also like to sing – perhaps fragments of a makjetta or an ghana fil-gholi – but kitarristi prefer to use this time to play among themselves. Kitarristi might exercise their prerogative by halting an ghannej mid-way through a verse on the
premise of needing to readjust the tuning of a string. This evening, after twenty to thirty
minutes of casual playing and chat in this room, at 8pm the kitarristi emerge and take
their places on the stage. The ghannejja soon follow suit.

By the time the first session begins all of the dinner plates have been cleared
away. Drinks may be ordered during the performance but people rarely do, conscious
that they must pass through the space between the audience and the daqqaqa to do so.
Drinks are, however, supplied to the daqqaqa just before and during a performance,
placed on the table in front of them alongside a plethora of recording devices owned by
daqqaqa and dilettanti. A short announcement of community notices is made by George
Aquilina iż-Żghir, the club’s president, before the ghana commences. During this
session, the audience members – particularly those located toward the rear of the room –
continue to talk quietly, watch the muted television that is mounted on a side wall, knit,
and flick through magazines. Aquilina, Nick Vassallo (the club’s vice-president), some
of the dilettanti and even some of the daqqaqa do not hesitate to frown, hiss, click their
fingers or even call out for quiet. Those nearer the stage remain more attentive. During
the weeks that I spend at the club, quite a few in the audience freely admit that they are
not too interested in ghana, seeing it as part of the evening rather than its focus.

After this first session is over, chairs are hastily rearranged around the table in
front of the stage and large quantities of complimentary food and drink are served to the
daqqaqa who gather round to eat, drink and talk together. Some sit, others stand or
move back to tables 1, 2 and 3. A raffle is called, its proceeds going toward the upkeep
of the club. On some evenings the kitarristi will at this point retire again to the back
room to ‘retune their guitars’ (play a little more fil-kwiet); however, a quick check
onstage suffices tonight. During this break between sessions some in the audience leave
for home. It is awkward to exit through the door right next to the stage when a
performance is taking place, much as it is to visit the bar. The second session of ghana
spiritu pront begins at 10pm. One ġhannej from the first session remains, joined by three new ġhannejja and a different prim kitarrist. In the first session there were three akkumpanjisti (more than two is common in Australia), but this time only two are present. This final session ends at 10.45pm, after which everyone packs up quickly and heads home.

Case study 3: serata in Victor Borg’s garage, Botany Bay, Sydney, Australia, 19th November 1989

A video recording made in a Maltese-Australian home in Sydney in 1989 documents a kind of social occasion that once proliferated in Australia, but which is now rare. Private serati such as this one, known in Australia as ġhana fid-djar (“ġhana in the houses”), are events held in the homes and garages of daqqqa and dilettanti that are attended by friends and their families by invitation. Documented in Australia since the mid-1950s, this occasion is the precursor of the more recent “open-shop” community venues such as Klabb Ġhannejja Maltin (Cash in Agius 2001:293-294). This occasion often provides a platform for introspective faitti, light-hearted comic stanzas, or bawdier songs which include female ġhannejja.

Most of those in attendance at this particular occasion are daqqqa, dilettanti and their immediate families, all of whom appear to know each other well. There are around thirty men, women and children present in the garage for this occasion. The room is about twenty feet long by fifteen wide with a high ceiling (figure 53). Being mid-November, the garage door is cranked open a couple of feet to let in air (and simultaneously let sound out into the neighbourhood). The walls are adorned with a variety of Maltese memorabilia, alongside tools, domestic appliances and boxes of household objects. On one wall is an enormous two-dimensional plywood model of an

90 This recording appears as track 1 on the accompanying DVD.
acoustic guitar that was made a few years earlier by some of the daqqaqa and used in a local festa procession (Bonello personal communication 2011). People are seated around large benches that are lined up against each side wall. At the far end of the room is a stage area comprised of three chairs for the kitarristi, behind which ghannejja stand in a row facing toward the video camera that is positioned by the garage door.

Fig. 53. Plan of Victor Borg’s garage, Sydney, Australia.
Two *ghana* sessions are recorded on this occasion. The first session, taking place in the afternoon, is a performance of *ghana spiritu pront* with four *ghannejja* – two of whom are visiting from Malta, Salvu Pace *is-Sulari* and Mikiel Cutajar *is-Superstar* – and three *kitarristi*, the *prim kitarrist* being an eleven or twelve year old Charlie Bonello *ta’ Skuti*. This is a typical performance of *ghana spiritu pront* in sol, lasting around an hour. A copy of this video (and others made on their tour) will no doubt be taken back to Malta by Pace and Cutajar as a memento for themselves and to share with friends.

The second session of *ghana spiritu pront*, taking place later that evening, is an interesting contrast to the first as the performance dynamic and arrangement of performers differs from the presentational norm that is seen in the first session. Eight *ghannejja* are taking part in this *ghana spiritu pront* (their positions are marked by letters A–H on figure 53), only three of whom are positioned in the stage area. Seated behind the three *kitarristi* is a female *ghannej*, Georgina Camenzuli *is-Semenza* (C). Standing near her is her husband Žaren Camenzuli *is-Semenza* (A) and another male *ghannej* (B). Seated at table 2 is one *ghannej* (H) and three other men; around table 3 are four *ghannejja* (D–G) and three of their male friends; and around table 4 are six women, one man and occasionally two young girls. Children move freely between the main house and the garage and are occasionally seen and heard shouting and playing. It appears that table 3 hosts the majority of the *ghannejja* and dilettanti. Tables 1 and 4, those furthest from the stage area, are mostly occupied by women. As at Klabb Ghannejja Maltin, those more closely involved in the tradition appear to sit closer to the stage area; women tend to sit toward the rear of the room. However, during the first session (in which they do not participate) Georgina and Žaren Camenzuli are seated around table 4: Georgina is with her female friends close by the garage door and Žaren is seated close to table 2, bridging the physical gap between his wife and the other *ghannejja* on table 3.
Atypical performance behaviours abound in this session. The eight ghannejja (four or six are the norm) are distributed around the room, six of whom are seated and one of which is female. Occasionally, two of the ghannejja sing whilst their children sit on their laps. Lyrics are light hearted, often comic, and frequently provoke laughter from both the audience and the daqqaqa themselves. There is more audible chatter throughout as opposed to the general quiet of the first session. The key of this performance, doh (sounding as D major), is usually associated with ghan fil-gholi and with female singers. Some of the male ghannejja compensate by singing in a lower register, therefore their vocal timbre is somewhat more relaxed and less powerful than usual. During the first few stanzas some of the ghannejja gesture for others to join in, appearing to settle on their order on-the-fly. Additionally, singing partners are not always clearly defined. For example, Georgina and Żaren Camenzuli is-Semenza sing against one another (as they often do at informal occasions), yet periodically another ghannej will address one or both of them. A good duel emerges between ghannej B (Bertu Zammit) and D (Frank Saliba Kuzzu); however, Saliba is at times picked on by F (Joe Vella il-Bokser), G (Mikiel Cutajar is-Superstar) and H (Charlie Bonello). Many of the behaviours and structuring rules of ghan spirtu pront, carefully adhered to in the first session, appear to dissolve in this second session.

As is typical at the conclusion of an ghan spirtu pront session, the kadenzi are used by the ghannejja to reiterate that they are all friends, that their duels are good natured, and to extend thanks to the hosts for their hospitality and to each other for their friendship. On concluding this session everyone warmly applauds each other. As I was not present at this occasion I cannot comment on the non-musical activities before and after each session, or what was happening in the house during the performances; I am limited to analysing what is literally framed by the video camera. However, on the basis of similar events that have been described to me, we can assume that the occasion
would have run until the early hours of the morning and that more women would have been present in the house, likely socialising in the kitchen whilst preparing food.

**Case studies analysis**

The following analysis of these three *ghana spirtu pront* performances concentrates on the physical and conceptual frame of each occasion: the environment each performance is being enacted in, and the constitution of and interaction between those individuals present for it. Although these two framing devices intersect, I have divided my analysis into two parts in order to better draw attention to how the physical components affect the conceptual ones. The venues for all three occasions have associations with other social activities besides *ghana*, therefore I contend that each space carries with it particular expectations of sociability and behaviours that are transferred from the primary function of each venue. Differences in the frame of each occasion reveal the unique convergence of individual, collective, spatial and geographic factors particular to the conditions of each performance space and the forms of intimacy associated with them. These factors, in turn, affect the communicative and symbolic components of the performance itself as they are transmitted and received by those who music together – musicians and audience alike. Arching across all of these examples is a metanarrative of ‘performing Malteseness’, where one negotiates an identity (or a number of identities) in relation to a body of symbols that are shared by those with a common ethnicity. Determining which of these aspects are performed, where, and how is key to understanding what is being transmitted through *ghana*.

**Part one: constructing spaces**

I turn first to the construction and use of space in the frame of each performance. The architecture of a venue, the re-organisation of this space by its users, their
arrangement within it, their movement through it, and their interaction with symbolic objects in it reflect and impact the performances and relationships that are being manifested.

In the compact confines of Johnny’s Bar it is almost impossible to visit the bar (or the bathroom) without passing in front of the camera or obstructing other people’s views of the performance. Not only are such visual intrusions to a performance unavoidable, so are sonic intrusions in the form of noise emanating from those inside the bar and outside in the street. However, the small scale of this venue has a complementary effect: when an ghannejjja sings, the room (and the street outside) is filled with sound. There is no need for amplification to improve volume or clarify enunciation. The volume of the ghannejja against the background chatter, the jostling, the heat and the visual and aural intrusions to the performance provoke a feeling of intimacy between performers and listeners. Here, ghana appears as a living tradition that is part of the fabric of this environment and not a disembodied activity. The daqqaga and those in the audience are present because they have an investment in the performance and to each other; daqqaga do not come to earn money or the audience to experience a folkloric performance, they come to engage with networks of friends.

There are a number of spatial similarities between Johnny’s Bar and the garage in Sydney: they are both small, intimate, somewhat cramped spaces that feature an un-raised stage area which keep the daqqaga on the same level as the audience, both physically and metaphorically. However, it appears that the domestic intimacy and paraphernalia of the private home can elicit more relaxed attitudes toward traditional performance rules than at Johnny’s Bar – rules that are in fact abided by in the first session held in the garage featuring two visiting Maltese ghannejja. The second session in the garage is far more informal: many of the ghannejja are seated, their numbers and their order are defined during the first few stanzas and not beforehand, a female ghannej
participates alongside her husband, a large number of women (and children) are present in the audience, and there is a great deal of laughter throughout the session. Additionally, the stage in this example expands to include ghannejja seated at the two tables flanking it, blurring the usual formal distinctions between artist and audience and suggesting a shift toward something that resembles a participatory performance – a perception that may encourage a feeling of greater communal integration in this context. None of these elements are present in Johnny’s Bar.

Klabb Ghannejja Maltin has the distinction of being a venue for which ghana is the primary reason for its existence. George Aquilina iż-Żghir, an ghannej himself, claims it as the only club in Australia or Malta that is organised specifically around ghana (George Aquilina personal communication 2014). As such, the club incorporates a spatial layout that lends itself to (presentational) performance and sociability. The expansive main hall and the raised stage provide the audience with a good view of the performers, and its open-plan configuration featuring large, round tables encourage face-to-face engagement between audience members. Yet, during a performance, the raised stage and the physical gulf between it and the general audience’s tables dislocates one from the other – this spatial divide mirroring something of an interactional gulf that also exists between these two groups outside of the performance itself. The two tables adjacent to the stage, for instance, are occupied almost exclusively by daqqaqa and their close friends. As found here, and observed at practically every ghana occasion I have encountered, those individuals most involved in the manifestation of ghana performances situate themselves close to the stage: there is usually a correlation between where an individual sits at a performance and his level of involvement in the performative aspect of musicking. It is ironic that Klabb Ghannejja Maltin, a space deliberately designed for ghana, is the venue that in fact dislocates daqqaqa the most from their audience in spatial terms, discouraging more informal performances. Malta’s
compact bar venues and the intimate events held in homes across Malta and its diaspora reflect more the fundamental nature of *ghana*’s (and indeed Malta’s) intimate, small-scale, close-knit communities. The fact that Klabb Għannejja Maltin (and the MCCA club) can comfortably host four times as many individuals as Johnny’s Bar and the Sydney garage detaches its patrons somewhat from the intimacy afforded by the smaller venues, and places *ghana*, quite literally, on a stage. However, Klabb Għannejja Maltin is clearly an important venue to those who regularly meet in its space.

In Klabb Għannejja Maltin memories adorn the walls, are consumed from plates and glasses and are debated across tables. Photographs, posters, musical instruments, commemorative plaques and awards, *ghana* CDs and DVDs, traditional food and drink – these objects serve as significant tangible symbols of Maltese identity, commemorating people and places in Malta and those persons affiliated, past and present, with the club. The presence of these objects help individuals to negotiate Maltese-Australian identities by anchoring their memories to a shared home (Malta) and to a shared present, as symbols of relative permanence and stability that give the illusion of continuity and of the rediscovery of the past in the present (after Connerton 1989:37). These markers of a common ethnicity and migrant experience bind this otherwise quite diverse community together. Malta is relocated into this space; or, perhaps, Maltese-Australians are transported to Malta through it. The construction of an in-between space such as this, where relationships to “absent others” are fostered, generates what Anthony Giddens describes as a “phantasmagoric” place, whose form is “thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from [it]” (Giddens 1990:18-19). Yet, it is the physicality of bodily, face-to-face, long-term, “focused” encounters between those who share the everyday environment of Klabb Għannejja

91 Some of these objects are, additionally, ritualistic objects used for *ghana* performance. Guitars are hung on walls as in Maltese bars, but most *kittaristi* prefer to bring their own for performances. The guitars on the walls, then, are primarily for decoration. Indeed, three of Pinu Baldacchino’s guitars are kept in a glass cabinet as a memorial to him.
Maltin that forms a sense of the local here (after Hannerz 1996:26-27) – even if this is, to a large extent, a phantasmagoric local.

Maltese memory-objects are also present in the garage example, although to a lesser extent. In Johnny’s Bar there are no overt nationalistic emblems or traditional decorative objects or posters. Objects here instead have diverse origins and associations, although local snacks and drinks are consumed. In all three venues these kinds of objects sit side by side with more functional items. These spaces are, after all, not spaces of commemoration or ritual re-enactment, but are fashioned for entertainment. Symbolic physical objects help to locate and ground each space within a historic continuum, confirming behaviours and activities as ‘traditional’ and thereby legitimating them as contemporary manifestations of established norms.

**Part two: community and intimacy**

In the foregoing analysis, space is considered in tangible terms by the physical attributes of the performance venues and the ways in which they order and influence the behaviour of individuals who engage with ġhana in them. I now examine how these same spaces are conceptually constructed by those who music together in them. As Maltese and (most) Maltese-Australian ġhana performance venues are more commonly used for non-performance activities, the manifestation and interpretation of each ġhana performance is to a great extent influenced by the underlying behaviour patterns of the community formations associated with the everyday activities that occur in each venue. Through the act of musicking together in socially significant environments, individuals (who often feature in one another’s lives in numerous ways outside of the performance itself) ideologically (re-)construct and transform these everyday, often utilitarian spaces

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92 In some other bars in Malta, such as Klabb tal-Boċċi at Pieta or Nusu’s Bar in Qormi, ġhana memorabilia do adorn the walls. This usually comprises guitars and photographs of living and deceased daqqaga.
into performance spaces (after Stokes 1994:4). During these occasions, the social transactions that concern those who use these spaces are put under a microscope, allowing them to be meditated on in a space that is within the everyday, yet safely apart from it. A performance – comprising both musical and social activities – confirms and sustains these relationships through mutual engagement with a common set of symbols and behaviours.

Anthony Cohen proposes that a community fundamentally determines itself through the recognition of similarity and difference; specifically, “the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups” (Cohen 1998:12). Whilst members of a community do “recognize important differences among themselves, they also suppose themselves to be more like each other than like the members of other communities” (ibid.:21). Of course, a community may share a commonality of forms – symbols and behaviours – and invest great meaning in them, but this does not imply that a uniformity of meaning is inferred from these forms by those who share them (ibid.:20). Yet, a community’s “common ownership of symbols may be so intense that they may be quite unaware or unconcerned that they attach to them meanings which differ from those of their fellows” (ibid.:21). Such symbols become “aggregating devices” which unite those who share them, “transforming the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity”, whereby one recognises that those who do not share these symbols are more different than those who do (ibid.).

In my case studies there appear two orientations toward ghana as a symbol of aggregation among those who attend a performance: firstly, those individuals who would describe themselves as belonging to an ghana community, in which performing ghana represents a heightened, transcendent state of communality (perhaps even of Victor Turner’s “communitas” (Turner 1969)), and secondly, those who view ghana as
an ancillary to ‘Maltese’ forms of sociability. Those individuals in the first category, principally *daqqaq,* *dilettanti* and *oganajżers,* would be described by Kay Shelemay as a musical community, “a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performance” (Shelemay 2011:364). However, many individuals in the Klabb Għannejja Maltin audience (as a particular example) do not appear to view *ghan* as a primary marker of their collectivity. In fact, far from sustaining their collectivity, *ghan* for some appears to encroach on their sociability. Although *ghan* performances are the ostensible reason for Maltese to meet for this particular occasion, many who attend find the extra-musical activities and sociability of the community that forms around a performance as appealing as the *ghan* itself – perhaps even more so, as my case study narrative suggests. What unites these disparate individual identities is a common, although heterogeneously constructed, identification with Malteseness – the recognition of a “collective self” (Cohen 1994:11) – that is manifested through *ghan* performance. For Shelemay, this kind of general collectivity can be characterised as a descent community.

Descent communities are established by individuals who recognise similarities with one another along lines of ethnicity, nationality, kinship, locale, or religion (Shelemay 2011:367). In these types of community, identities can be reinforced through the catalysing impact of music: “Music helps generate and sustain the collective, while at the same time, it contributes to establishing social boundaries both within the group and with those outside of it” (ibid.:368). Thus, similarities and differences can be articulated through music and insiders and outsiders can be defined. Such performances of culture – what Turino terms as “public expressive cultural practices” (Turino 2008:2), and Cohen as “‘objective’ manifestations of locality or ethnicity” (Cohen 1998:108) – are a vital way in which a community legitimates itself and communicates itself to others. What makes one Maltese, or a particular type of Maltese, is a key concern of
ghana performance, where ghana is used to erect multiple and overlapping boundaries of similarity and difference that maintain a tangled web of distinctions between ‘us and them’. Therefore, the questions to ask in my analysis now are: what particular aspects of Malteseness are being performed through ghana by those communities forming at each occasion, and how are these aspects reflective of the community formations inherent to the venues in which they are being enacted?

Let us look first at the type of community prevalent in Maltese bars – the archetypal ghana performance venue of today. Ghana spiritu pront is a performance of antagonism and debate whose form emerges from the type of sociability that is fostered by the Maltese village bar environment. Johnny’s Bar, like many establishments used for ghana performance, is for most of the week a meeting place for close-knit groups of men of various ages who either live or work locally in this part of Żejtun. It is a place where men can socialise in a relaxed environment away from work and home. Individuals within these groups know each other well, although not all of these groups will interact with one another. During an ghana performance the bar is primarily attended by men invested in the musical community – daqqqa, dilettanti and their friends – who may travel from outside of Żejtun for the occasion. Those not interested in ghana disperse before it begins. At all of the bar-based ghana sessions I have attended in Malta female attendance has ranged from negligible to nil. Any female presence in these venues is usually mediated by a man (see also Mitchell 2002:77-79). At only one serata I attended, at the Żejtun Labour Party Club, were a number of women present; however, almost all of these women remained seated in the town square outside the bar whilst their husbands and partners moved between the two spaces. The bar itself remained male-dominated.

Jon Mitchell depicts these kind of Maltese bars as places where hegemonic masculinity is performed: where reputations are negotiated and social standing and
respect is conferred, and where “being a man” is a major preoccupation (Mitchell 2002:77, 79, 96). Consistent with the trope of honour and shame, as played out in Mediterraneanist literature, the respect that is afforded by “being a man” in Malta is not an inherent property of the individual, but is bestowed upon him by others and determined by his behaviour and involvement with their community activities (ibid.97; see also O’Reilly Mizzi 1994:371-372; also Clark 2012:130-132; Davis 1977:77, 89-101). In one Vallettan bar (not associated with għana), many of whose patrons were involved in one of the city’s brass band clubs, Mitchell encountered a performance of masculine play which closely resembles that of għana spirtu pront:

[M]en are ideally sociable. This property is demonstrated in particular by the ability to take a joke … [T]he suggestion is that men should be sufficiently masculine to be able to deal with goading either by ignoring it or by making witty retorts. A great deal of time is spent creating the situation where such witty retorts are necessary, and they are framed as a kind of social drama where masculinity was created through performative competence. As things get more heated, and remarks both more cutting and more humorous, all conversation will stop so that people can listen to the entertainment … Antonio DeBono was particularly adept at provoking a reaction … whose most common victim was his best friend … [whom] he could get to the point of violence within three minutes, [as he] then proceeded to demonstrate, to the pleasure of all those present. (Mitchell 2002:84-85)

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93 The geographic location of such bars and każini in Maltese villages often reflects this hegemony, as noted by Boissevain in the 1960s. Usually found in the heart of a village near the church and town square, traditionally these are spaces through which women transit, but in which men cluster (Boissevain 2006:53).
An *ghan spirtu pront* duel enacted in a similar type of bar mirrors these spontaneous conversational displays in a more formal, presentational context. Among *ghanneija* such teasing and joking between friends create “joking relationships” that Ranier Fsadni likens to Cretan Glendiots “stealing to make friends” (after Herzfeld 1985), “where mock conflicts are staged in order to avoid real ones” (Fsadni 1993:346). The mock conflicts of *ghana* are safely staged within the frame of play, outside of the everyday; for as Small suggests, “To play is to change the context of the communication, to lift it temporarily from the context of the everyday in order to explore the implications of a relationship or set of relationships without needing to commit oneself to it” (Small 1998:63). However, as I detailed earlier in an analogy with a game of poker, losses and gains in the field of play do transfer into the everyday life of *ghanneija*. *Ghana* is a very public activity whose improvised performances place its practitioners at great risk, whilst simultaneously affording them an opportunity to acquire great respect. In this light, Kevin Dawe’s depiction of masculine displays in Crete are reminiscent of comparable behaviours among *ghanneija*:

Performances of masculinity are not supposed to be premeditated, but produced on the spur of the moment, impromptu, so as to suit the situation at hand – any hint of preparation is said to reduce the effect. These improvisations, if successful, enlarge the reputation of the performer. They are capital … built up over time with an individual’s repeated success at performing a generally accepted role, that of a "man" in the community. (Dawe 1996:98)

At the same time, a great weight of responsibility rests on the shoulders of all those who manifest *ghana*, as any transgression of its rules of engagement not only damage a
performer’s reputation as a man, but also reflects badly on his community and on the tradition itself.

Fsadni determines that in taking on the responsibility of preserving and representing the tradition of ghana (and thus embodying it), ghannejja in Malta “consciously see themselves as ‘guardians of folklore’ and in this role use ghana as a vehicle for statements about cultural traits in Maltese society, or rather ‘conflicting identities in Maltese society and culture’” (Fsadni 1993:336, referencing Sant Cassia 1989:164). Singers attempt to outdo each other by debating “general knowledge, Maltese culture (especially semantics, including metaphors, many possible levels of nuance, double-entendres, implication, and diction), wit, and humour” (Mifsud Chircop 2004:155). These are all topics that are also common to the conversational social field of establishments such as Johnny’s Bar. Through ghana’s frame of play, these everyday conversations, debates and presentations of masculinity are elevated into a folkloric performance activity in which everyday concerns are transferred into and transformed by a liminal space. Here, fundamental issues concerning Maltese identity and social standing can be safely negotiated by a community of like-minded individuals. It is these debates, or rather the liminal forum that such debates offer in the context of ghana performances, that are attractive to the broader descent communities that form around the musical community. Close physical engagement with the musical community itself is not necessarily required; it is their performances that are an aggregating symbol for the community which forms around them.

Among Maltese-Australian musical communities we find comparable concerns and forms of sociability as at Johnny’s Bar. However, at Klabb Ghannejja Maltin there is present not only a close-knit musical community but an additional, larger and more diverse group of individuals – the majority of whom are not intimately involved or connected with the musical community. For many in this broader descent community it
seems the social context created by għana is often a greater attraction than the musical performance itself. As Mary Rose Grech points out in her evaluation of the audiences at Klabb Ghannejja Maltin and the MCCA,

The people who attend these clubs do not do so only to listen to għana. These għana sessions serve as a reason for these members of the Maltese community to gather once a week; listening to għana is the last of many reasons why people attend. (Grech 2003:42)

Manuel Casha echoes this sentiment, suggesting that many attendees claim they come “to kill an hour”, inqattghu siegha – in other words to enjoy the atmosphere (Casha 1997). Consuming traditional food and drink (compare Grech 2003:46; Klein 2005a:62) and conversing in Maltese with others who share a Maltese emigrant experience whilst surrounded by images and memorabilia from ‘home’ creates a strong draw which contributes to the attendance of serati in these clubs. To some, għana is one comforting symbol of Malteseness among many. Ghannejja and kitarristi contribute to a soundscape, or “sound world” (after Feld 2000), of Maltese sociability that exists in these spaces: conversations in the Maltese language, the clinking of glasses and plates, laughter, shouts from men playing cards or billiards. This ambience is just as affective as the physical symbols that fill the space.

Klabb Ghannejja Maltin, like the Sydney house party, is ultimately a space where emigrant Maltese can meet and feel at home – literally, in the latter example – engaging in Maltese behaviours and activities, sharing nostalgic reminiscences and contemporary news from Malta alongside gossip from their own emigrant community. Għana is suited to this type of community formation as the issues debated through it reflect every facet of the social lives of those who engage with it, of “birth, courtship,
marriage, death, nature, suffering” (Fsadni 1993:337) – of “values at the core of Maltese society, exposing its contradictions and tensions” (Mifsud Chircop 2004:154). It is the universality of these themes to Maltese at home and abroad that allows ghana to be so readily shared as a symbol of Malteseness. Through the folkloric interface of ghana, the voices of the ghannejja metaphorically and literally embody and negotiate the traumas of migration, displacement and alienation, of what it means to be Maltese-Australian, what it means to be a man (or a woman), of us and them, past and present, here and there.94 Indeed, Klein suggests that Maltese-Australians consciously use folklore to construct their identity as “a ‘security blanket’ of belonging against the ‘often cold and hostile’ Australian mainstream culture” (Klein 2005a:63, referencing Pirotta 1998).

With this in mind, we might (again) consider Klabb Ghannejja Maltin as a physical space that offers its patrons a portal to Malta – but is this a portal to a Malta of the past, or the present? Klabb Ghannejja Maltin and its type of diasporic community space surrounds its members with a “security blanket” of Malteseness constituted of symbolic objects, behaviours and activities which stimulate Maltese modes of engagement – albeit in a series of forms that, Maurice Cauchi claims, were “fixed and fossilised at the point of departure” from Malta by the emigrant generation (Cauchi 1990:56). When individuals gravitate toward tables according to village of origin they are embodying an important territorial aspect of Maltese sociability (see Boissevain 1994; 2006), manifesting time-honoured distinctions of civic similarity and difference by forming village community islands within the space of the hall – formations which simultaneously mirror their island of Malteseness in the multicultural sea of

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94 Turino suggests that group bonds are often partially channelled through the medium of presentational performers and their performances (Turino 2008:62).
These kind of symbols and behaviours evoke and keep alive important memories and distinctions from a past Malta, sustaining “an imagined and nostalgic Malteseness through which Maltese Australians can form bonds of belonging and a sense of common history” (Klein 2005a:63). Although the past does feature heavily in the interactions at Klabb Għannejja Maltin, għana has the unique capacity to bind together the past, the present and the future in its form. Għana references the past through its language, imagery and themes, offering stability and continuity through its inherited, ritualistic form; it references the present in its debates and texts which deal with issues pertinent to the contemporary community (even if these often allude to traditional values); and it sustains the future of its community by its promise of further engagements to continue its debates every Thursday and Friday night. Indeed, as Ranier Fsadni points out, għana spritu pront is concerned with debating issues – it does not intend to resolve them (see Fsadni 1993:342-345). Għana as a traditional activity has become reified as a cornerstone of Maltese-Australian identity for those who engage with it in Australia, but it would be wrong to regard its performances as fossilised re-enactments of remembered behaviours. Għana remains a dynamic activity that is at its most affective when it refers to and affirms the present.

The use of għana as an affirmative celebration of the Maltese-Australian present is clearly evident in the intimate environment of the Sydney house party. Here, the musical community and their immediate families gather away from the gaze of those ‘other’ Maltese who attend the clubs but do not invest in għana as much as they do. They sing in an informal manner, praising each other and their hosts profusely before digging into one another mercilessly. I believe that at the house party, as at Klabb Għannejja Maltin, there is a conscious awareness that Maltese behaviours, language and

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95 Village of origin is an important identifier for Maltese in Malta and in its diaspora. It is common for the nicknames of Maltese to change when they move to Australia to reference their Maltese or Gozitan home village, replacing nicknames that refer to physical or personality traits with something that is deemed to be more symbolic in the diaspora.
symbols are being interacted with within a folkloric frame. However, the informality and privacy of the home environment presents an opportunity for the daqqaqa to relax and modify the rules of engagement, thereby manifesting ghana with an informality (and musical variety) that is not found at either Klabb Ghannejja Maltin or Johnny’s Bar. Yet, the male hegemony common to ghana still dominates in the garage: male performers dramatically outweigh female and men occupy the seats closest to the stage area. The garage itself offers an intermediate space between the privacy of the house and its traditional association as the domain and responsibility of women (Boissevain 2006:18-20), and the public outdoors. In Maltese communities the garage is often constructed as a male-gendered space within the home, in which daqqaqa entertain their friends and keep ghana memorabilia alongside tools, freezers and other objects that are unwelcome in the house.

In each of these case studies ghana is a “symbolic anchor” that serves as a potent sign of community, belonging and of the existence of a shared past (after Lewis in Bennett 2004:3). Although the performances, participants and venues take different forms in each example according to a unique convergence of factors, in all instances ghana stimulates and sustains face-to-face community formations – formations that are endemic to Maltese small-scale sociability in general (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994).  

Ghana unites individuals in an activity that temporarily manifests ideal, convivial social relationships in spaces of communal significance. However, ghana communities are not just limited to localised, face-to-face interactions. Daqqaqa in diasporic ghana communities have communicated with each other via the medium of audio-visual recordings for nearly sixty years. The following section examines these relationships and the impact that recordings have had on enabling and shaping them.

96 Marilyn Clark describes Maltese in Malta as “urban villagers” (after Gans 1962), suggesting that even in urban Maltese communities life is conducted on a face-to-face basis (Clark 2012:132). Such interactions are often manifested and controlled via gossip (O'Reilly Mizzi 1994; also Connerton 1989:16-17).
4.3 Transnational musicking

Since the late 1950s audio-visual ghana recordings have played a crucial role in suturing the ruptures in face-to-face transactions that have been caused by diasporic relocation, emerging as a key medium through which friendships between individuals in distant ghana communities have been forged and sustained. In chapter three I drew attention to the role and impact of recordings in the learning process; here I turn to their communicative aspect. The first magnetic tape recordings of ghana (known colloquially as żigarelli, “ribbons”) appear to have been made at the 1954 Mnarja folksong competition by the Rediffusion radio network [Times of Malta 1954].

ghana communities in Malta and its diaspora were quick to engage with this new technology. By 1961 it is reported that several ghannejja were regularly recording their own ghana sessions on privately owned open-reel magnetic tape machines and were sending these recordings to friends in the diaspora (Cassar Pullicino 1961:68). Over the following decades this trend continued as new audio and video recording and distribution formats emerged, such as audio cassette, CD, mp3, VHS, DV and DVD.

The expansion of ghana as a musical and social phenomena since the 1950s correlates with the introduction and adoption of consumer recording technology in Malta (Fsadni 1992; 1993:340-341). Ghana and recording technology have subsequently become so intertwined that it is alleged the ideal length of an ghana spirtu pront session as being forty-five minutes to an hour was dictated by the constraints of

97 The earliest surviving tapes of ghana recorded by Rediffusion at the Mnarja competition date from 1957 (Ragonesi and Mifsud Chircop 1999). Toni Sant, however, suggests that recordings of ghana sessions were being broadcast on Rediffusion radio since 1952 (Toni Sant personal communication 2015).

98 Marcia Herndon believes privately owned tape machines were first used to record ghana around 1958 (Herndon 1971:161). European sales literature of this period advocated the use of tape recorders for a wide variety of applications, prominent among which were recording musical performances in the home and sending audio messages to friends and family abroad (Bijsterveld and Jacobs 2009:29-30).
cassette tape length,\textsuperscript{99} and that the tradition of ghannejja stating in their opening stanzas the performers who are present at the session and the performance location (and sometimes the date) developed from tape etiquette (Fsadni 1993:343). This imported technology rapidly became an intrinsic component of the experience of ghana, offering the community a new mode of communication that was compatible with existing modes of sociability and which met its emerging needs (in particular its coincidence with a period of mass emigration). Much like the adoption and indigenisation of European guitar design aesthetics, recording technology was also successfully assimilated into ghana because it could be readily incorporated into existing practices and, perhaps most importantly, it permitted the ghana community to take control of its production and consumption patterns and maintain its self-sufficient insularity. Private home-recording equipment is, after all, an active technology of production and consumption (Bijsterveld and Jacobs 2009:26): it is a medium through which its operator can capture whatever sounds (or images) he chooses and share them among his friends, enabling the community to emancipate their activities from extrinsic involvement. Just like guitars, the only other tangible asset of the ghana community, these recordings are suffused with the ‘local’: they are produced by members of the ghana community, they are recorded in familiar spaces that feature recognisable aural and visual markers, they are resistant to commodification (being made cheaply and often distributed at little or no cost), and they circulate exclusively within the community itself. As such, recordings are symbolic markers of the ghana community’s insularity and its resistance to mass media forms.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{99} Herndon was the first to notice this characteristic (in shortened length) on open-reel tape, observing how doqqqa appeared to instinctively know how to time their performances to fit on a side of tape (Herndon 1971:161-162).

\textsuperscript{100} Commercial CDs of ghana rarely feature in the collections of doqqqa and dilettanti. This is partly because commercial CDs of ‘authentic’ ghana number fewer than half a dozen, but also, I believe, because they are produced outside of the close-knit ghana community. The only commercial recordings that do appear in private collections – almost always dubbed onto cassette or CD – are the 1930s ghana recordings which are regarded as valuable historical documents.
The audio cassette is described by Peter Manuel as a democratic-participant media format, an example of a “new media” technology that distances itself from the hegemony of mass media:

The new media tend to be decentralized in ownership, control, and consumption patterns; they offer greater potential for consumer input and interaction, and heighten the user’s control over the form of consumption and over the relation to the media sender. (Manuel 1993:2)

The democracy of the cassette (or of any other affordable analogue or digital recordable media) lies in its potential as a medium through which one can react against mass media forms of communication and commodification, and the alienating, passive modes of consumption that these forms are often thought to promote (ibid.:7). Democratic media permit small-scale communities to maintain control over production and consumption patterns, thereby embedding these media objects within the sociocultural life of the community that use them via private networks of production and exchange. *Ghana* in non-democratic forms also abound in the form of gramophone discs, vinyl, radio and television broadcasts. Although these media forms are produced by recording companies or in association with national broadcasting organisations, their consumption can nevertheless become democratised when they are dubbed onto recordable media by those in the *ghana* community.\(^\text{101}\) Thus, these performances can be enjoyed without the need for an expensive and delicate turntable or gramophone player, they can be played back repeatedly at will (democratising the ephemerality of live broadcasts), and, above all, they can be easily copied and shared. It is particularly in this latter point where we

\(^{101}\) Indeed, it is often thanks to individuals recording live radio and television broadcasts of *ghana* that many of these programmes can still be enjoyed today, since Maltese broadcasting organisations have not systematically archived their transmissions.
find these types of media crucial to sustaining (and often instigating) face-to-face modes of engagement between musical communities in Malta and in Australia, providing a conduit through which diasporic communities can be reconnected to the Maltese mainland. However, this reconnection is a complex and rather ambivalent suturing of identity and belonging to a collective past and present (after Hall 1996:598). As Mitchell Ogden suggests in a statement that resonates through the rest of this chapter:

[T]he magnetically transmitted sounds and/or images may draw diasporics together through the sharing of media experience, or they may remind and reinforce the profound distances – in time, space, and circumstance – that separate them. Diasporic media production works precisely in a magnetic way; it is both attractive and repellant. (Ogden 2008:51)

In this final section, divided into two parts, I examine how transnational relationships have been formed and sustained across the Maltese diaspora (specifically between Malta and Australia) via the content of privately-recorded media and their physical circulation.102 Transnationalism is a field of study which considers the interactions and relationships that are maintained between home and diaspora; of “migrants’ ongoing activities in their home countries, including remittances, return visits, business and political connections, kinship links and symbolic ties” (King 2011:185). One of the fundamental component theories of transnationalism is that of migrants having multiple allegiances to place (Al-Ali and Koser 2002:8) – of belonging to a ‘home’ that is “stretched over time and space” (Westwood and Phizacklea 2000:2).

102 I am limiting my analysis to recordings of ‘live’, directed performances of prejjem in which a single musical performance occasion is recorded alongside messages to individuals in the diaspora. I determine two other categories of recording to exist in the ġhana community: recordings of occasions that are not specifically intended for diasporic circulation and which do not feature messages (the most common type of recording), and those recordings whose material is edited together thematically from a range of historic performances, akin to a mixtape.
Negotiating national identities and transnational belongings are of particular concern to individuals in Maltese ghana communities at home and in the diaspora, as I have shown; however, assessing whether the ghana community might be considered a transnational community is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, in this section I explore how transnational relationships are figured by individuals who music together across geographic borders. I narrow my focus on to the relationships that are negotiated between individuals in Maltese and Australian kitarrist communities of practice.

**Part one: (re-)constructing friendships and social spaces**

Bonds between Maltese and Australian ghana communities have grown strong since the 1950s, due to a large extent to the proliferation of recording technology during this period. In a practice that continues to the present day, spoken messages addressed to the general diasporic ghana community and to specific individuals within it will be recorded in Malta alongside a session or two of ghana or kitarri biss. On receiving this recording, those in the diasporic ghana community will respond in kind. These recordings reveal a great deal of information about the relationships between those individuals who music together through this medium and of the performance spaces in which they choose do so. I am particularly concerned here with the content and significance of their spoken messages and with the “unintended spillages” (Campbell 2012) of sights and sounds that were not necessarily intended to be recorded. I examine two recordings of kitarri biss which feature spoken messages that have been sent between communities of kitarristi in Malta and Australia in order to illustrate the nature of the relationships that are created and sustained through this medium.

In a thirty-three minute audio recording dating from the early 1960s (originally recorded on open-reel tape, but discovered dubbed onto cassette), several pieces of

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103 (Cardona et al, no date (early 1960s))
*Kitarri biss* are recorded during a private occasion in the home of Ġanni Abela *Faffarinu*, an *akkumpanjist* and *ghana fil-gholi* singer of Valletta. Five men appear to be present: Ġanni Abela *Faffarinu*, Karmenu Cardona *it-Tapp*, Pawlu Frendo *il-Bożen*, Ninu Xibberas *il-Moqqli* and an unidentified tape recordist. Nestled between the *prejjem* is a four minute spoken segment in which three of these men speak. Their messages are addressed to a number of individuals in Melbourne, Australia through the mediator ‘Ġanni’, the recipient of this tape. Of particular interest in these initial messages is the formality of their composition and the type of language that is used. The tape operator speaks first:

My friend, Ġanni. We are making this tape here in Valletta, at Ġanni *Faffarinu*’s. Here is *it-Tapp* and some others. I – we – received your tape that you sent, which we greatly enjoyed. The playing was good and the *ghannejja* were also very good … I now send my regards to *Toto* and Neriku *tal-Ispinos* – I enjoyed listening to them. That’s why the playing was good, because he [Neriku] accompanies one of the best ones [*Toto*].

His message proceeds along an established, formulaic path for these kind of audio letters: he greets his friend who will receive the tape, describes the recording location, names some of those who are present, thanks Ġanni for the last tape that he sent, praises it, and sends his regards to two *kitarristi* in Melbourne. Following this opening statement, he speaks a little more freely on other issues (which I shall return to shortly). After these messages from the tape recordist, Ġanni Abela *Faffarinu* speaks:

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104 All of the excerpts that follow in this chapter are translations of messages spoken in Maltese (except where explicitly noted). These translations were produced in collaboration with Christine Cassar.
Gan – your name is Ġanni, like mine. Well, I send you my regards and my regards to all your friends, because you’re our friend and so are your friends. We are here in the room [il-kamra] recording a tape. it-Tapp will play prim, Bozen will be Doh and I will be La ... I send you my regards and I wish you well-being and happiness.105

What is revealing about these initial messages are their rather generic nature, Abela’s in particular. Abela evidently does not know Ġanni in Melbourne personally; nevertheless, Abela extends his best wishes to him as Ġanni is a member of the close-knit community of daqqaqa – specifically, he is someone who is facilitating communication through these tapes. Abela is evidently comfortable talking to Ġanni as he addresses him with the informal diminutive, “Ġan”. A blind friendship such as this one is nurtured through the audio medium alongside friendships that are founded on physical contact made prior to emigration – both Neriku Camilleri is-Sponos and Ġużeppi Xerri it-Toto played with Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp in Malta before they emigrated to Melbourne in the mid-1950s. Through this juxtaposition of personal and associative friendships we can begin to see how a transnational network of daqqaqa can be sustained and expanded through recorded media.

Turning to a more recent example of communication, from July 2014, Ray Attard, Joe Cutajar il-Witli, Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ, Charlie Attard il-Bukkaċċ, William Camilleri and four or five dilettanti met in Camilleri’s father’s home in Melbourne to record a two hour DVD of kitarri biss to send to Malta.106 Messages in Maltese are spoken to camera in the last five minutes of this recording. They start quite formally, but

105 The final sentence is “u nselli ghalikom hafna u nixtieqilkom gid u hena” – a formulaic phrase that is heard in various forms in recordings to the present day.

106 An extract of this recording is found on track 3 of the accompanying DVD.
become more casual. Peter Attard *il-Bukkaċċ* begins, echoing the language of Ġanni Abela *Faffarinu* from over fifty years earlier:

Our friends in Malta. I send my regards to you; to all our friends – *ghannejja* and *kitarristi*. I send my regards to Kevin, to Johnny *tal-Belt*, to everyone, right? I send my regards to you and all your family. We hope all is well.

Joe Cutajar *il-Witli* follows with a similar message:

How are you? Today we have met at our friend William’s father’s house. We’ve been playing with William and Pete. We’ve played together, unexpectedly, with Raymond, [who is visiting from Sydney] with work. We’ve been playing for three days! I send my regards to the *kitarristi*, especially to Skuti, Kevin, Ġanni *tal-Belt*, Frederick and everyone. All the *ghannejja*, right? Gozitans and Maltese! Goodbye.

The other *kitarristi* send similar short messages, some extending a greeting to the wives of particular individuals. At one point Cutajar interjects and addresses me in English. Two other *kitarristi* I had also met in Melbourne earlier that year, Ray and Peter, begin to address me as well – Ray affecting an exaggerated Australian accent. The sudden switch of language causes the *kitarristi* to laugh, shifting positions in their chairs. Peter apologises, “Excuse the Maltese language!”, to which Ray jokingly retorts, “Excuse the English!” As noted earlier, language is a particularly potent symbol of identity which draws boundaries of inclusion and exclusion via the inference of ethnicity. A moment such as this reminds the (quite often bilingual) Maltese or Maltese-Australian viewer of
the fact that the conversation is indeed occurring in Maltese. As soon as these messages to me are delivered in English the language shifts back to Maltese.

What is particularly interesting about Peter’s short message to me (in English) is the significance behind its linguistic formality:

Andrew, I hope all of your family are fine. We’ll send you a copy of this.

In this succinct message, Peter is transmitting to me two important communications which are common to these kind of messages that are delivered across the diaspora: he is sending his regards to my family (who, incidentally, he has not met), and he is promising to send me a copy of this recording. Symbolic and physical exchanges are taking place. This is a typical formulation for these kind of respectful messages between individuals who do not know each other well (I only spent time a short time with Peter), but who are connected to one another through their common interest in ġhana. In comparison, the brief messages addressed to me in English by Joe Cutajar il-Witli – with whom I spent considerably more time than I did with Peter – are far more casual, yet they also infer active exchange: “We’ll send you one [a copy of this DVD] Andrew, no problems ... Come back soon!”

I turn now to the sonic and visual spaces that are captured in each of these recordings. The performance venue in the 1960s audio recording is described as Abela’s kamra, literally a room. This term refers to a particular type of space, however, that is evocative of hosting male sociability. A kamra may, for example, refer to a back room of a bar, a garage, a small hunter’s shack or a fireworks factory. In this case it appears to be a room in Abela’s home, quite possibly his garage.\footnote{Several older daqqqa recall Ġanni Abela Faffarinu’s home playing host to a number of private ġhana occasions during this period.} The environment is certainly
private and *fil-kwiet*; this is not a recording made in a public space. As such, the guitars are clear, the voices are relaxed and the natural reverberations of the room’s stone walls can be heard. This kind of space and context affords an intimacy between the *daqqaqa* and the recording device that prompts longer, more detailed and personal messages than those typically found recorded at more public events. At the end of this recording Abela is heard singing *ghana fil-gholi*, a form of *ghana* that is described by *daqqaqa* as most suited to private settings. Adding further to the sense of intimacy in this recording, during quiet moments it is possible to hear children’s voices echoing in the background. Unusually, few intrusions of this kind are heard in this particular recording. Most other recordings of this type include recognisable background sounds such as voices, cars, horns, crockery, birds – sounds which capture something of the atmosphere of the recording space (certainly so if the recording is made in a bar) and the soundscape of Malta more generally. Invoking Matthew Campbell’s use of the term “unintended spillages” in recordings (which he predominantly ascribes to pauses in speech and the grain of the voice (Campbell 2012)), Angela Impey describes these kind of background sounds, breaks and interferences inherent in home-recorded cassettes by South Sudanese Dinka communities as artefacts that

invoke the minutiae of everyday life and engender a sense of immediacy, intimacy and proximity. Far from ephemeral, therefore, cassette tapes provide temporary ‘presences’ and a sense of grounded materiality that bridge the geographic, temporal, and affective distances that divided their creators and listeners. (Impey 2013:206)

Indeed, on listening to these recordings today *daqqaqa* often take pleasure in hearing a child shout in the background or an old motorbike roar past. These sounds, perhaps
initially regarded by the recordist as unwanted intrusions, over time and across the
diaspora may transform in significance and evoke affective, nostalgic memories of Malta.

These spillages become far more pronounced in video recordings, where such intrusions inevitably appear within the camera frame in addition to being captured by the microphone. In video recordings destined for a diasporic audience, the venue may well intentionally incorporate particularly symbolic objects such as Maltese or Australian flags, or else capture unintentional symbolic items such as local food and drink, architecture and decor, or recognisable audience members. Intrusions or spillages are more overt in recordings of occasions in bars and clubs, whereas quieter affairs in homes (more typical settings for *kitarri biss* occasions) are far less nationalistic and exhibit more subtly affective visual cues. For example, in the 2014 DVD example recorded in Sonny Camilleri’s home, there is nothing visually Maltese in the frame. None of the guitars themselves are made in Malta or by Maltese-Australian luthiers, and the furniture, decor and scale of the room is clearly not Maltese. One might argue that the men *look* Maltese, but in this particular recording Malteseness is primarily encoded sonically, in language and music, rather than visually.

In contrast, the frame of other video recordings made in Maltese bars and Australian clubs often feature far more visual cues. Even if these cues are not explicitly nationalistic in nature, the architecture and furnishings of a small Maltese bar can be quite affective to an emigrant Maltese. Ultimately, it is the combined audio-visual “spillages” of these Maltese bar venues, recorded weeks or perhaps years earlier, that are so affective to those who continue to view them in the diaspora. The small bar, the limestone walls, the styles of clothing, the noisy atmosphere, the language and the very graininess and distortion of the visual and sonic media itself enhances the feeling of distance and separation from Malta. Indeed, it could be argued that the idyllic ambience
and sociability of the Maltese bar captured on video is what the diasporic community desire to replicate in their Maltese-Australian clubs. When these video recordings are projected onto a big screen in these venues (as occurs an hour or two before Thursday evening ghana sessions begin at the MCCA in Melbourne) the hall is bathed in nostalgic sights and sounds that help to bridge the distance between diaspora and home, and between the present and the past, overlaying an idealised Maltese environment onto a Maltese-Australian one.

Audio and video letters nestled between musical performances are, of course, not the only way for individuals in these communities to stay in contact: written letters, telephone calls, emails, Skype, the exchange of photographs and gifts, and travel between locations are all methods that have been utilised over the decades. Connections are maintained through a range of physical and multi-media interactions, as is often the case of transnational transactions. Messages encoded within audio-visual media only tell part of the story; we must also examine the significance of the carriers of these messages.

Part two: gift networks

The messages conveyed in the two recordings I have detailed indicate that they exist within a system of reciprocal gifting. Peter Attard il-Bukkaċċ’s promise to send me a copy of that particular video is explicit; equally, it is inferred that those individuals who are addressed by name will also receive a copy, either directly or via a network of sharing. These video recordings may be delivered via the post or distributed hand-to-hand in bars and clubs. As copying a DVD is cheap and does not deprive the owner of the original item, gifting a recording can acquire for the recordist (or its mediator) great social capital disproportionate to the actual cost of the media. This transaction – saturated with all the meaning that is behind an exchange which proclaims “this is for
“I give this to you” – acquires for the benefactor a debt from the recipient that may be repaid in alternative, perhaps more advantageous, ways, such as a payment of money or the call of a favour. The debt may also be repaid by the recipient sharing his own recordings in a like-for-like exchange.

As an example of this reciprocity in the 1960s recording, Karmenu Cardona it-Tapp is gifting his musical ability in exchange for more tangible commodities that he requires in his old age. In his message, Cardona thanks his friends in Australia for sending him money:

Instead of a puddle, I found a sea [people were far more generous than he expected], with which I was very pleased ... These days I am a man too downtrodden by everything ... [although] my hands aren’t yet too bad to play some prim ... Any tape you’d like to send, send – not just yourself, but all your friends. And I will fill it for you, understand? As you deserve. For the pleasure you gave me [on hearing the recording from Australia] and the money you sent me.

After Cardona concludes his messages, the tape recordist explains to those in Melbourne that Cardona has bought some trousers and a shirt with the money that they had sent him. He then appeals to his friends in Australia to send Cardona any spare second-hand clothes that they might have. Gifts of clothing – sometimes a large box full – were common into the 1980s and 1990s at a time when clothes were far cheaper in Australia than in Malta (Bonello interview 2013b). Sometimes gifts have been manifestations of jokes between transnational daqqaqa, such as the ‘gift’ of a coffin that Pawlu Seychell l-Ghannej received from an unidentified individual in Australia – to which he subsequently replied indignantly, through song, in a recording – or the plastic skeleton that he received soon afterward (Bonello interview 2013b). However, returning
to the 1960s example, gifts usually take a more desirable form, as in the following instance discussed by the tape recordist in a message to Ġanni in Melbourne:

> I have told my brother about the [guitar] strings, for him to tell your friend, Wiği [who is in Malta]. I will take this matter in my own hands. I will buy the strings because he didn’t have the ones you wanted. After this tape you will receive the strings. I will send them at my own expense, because you spent money on the tape recorder. And amongst friends money is not an issue, alright?

This message appears to involve others who are potentially outside of the ghana community in a complex relay of messages and requests. Let us look at the balance: the Maltese-Australians have sent to Malta a recording of music and messages, a blank tape to fill and money for Cardona; the Maltese have responded with a recording of music and messages featuring Cardona and sets of guitar strings to follow. It is quite likely that these strings are those that were coveted by that generation of kitarristi as being the best for prejjem: a British make called Tuneful Strings that were popular in Malta, but which were not available in Australia (Joe Cutajar personal communication 2014). If these are indeed the strings that Ġanni in Melbourne is looking for, they will be well received by Maltese-Australian kitarristi. The tape recordist’s benevolence in acquiring (with difficulty, it seems) and gifting these prized strings at his own expense further perpetuates the reciprocity that sustains these transnational relationships.

It is not only gifts that are exchanged, but also people. The physical movement of persons between locations is encouraged (as noted earlier in Joe Cutajar il-Witli’s message to me) and features in many recordings. In the 2014 video, Sonny Camilleri offers his home to Maltese oganajżer and dilettant Charlie Mangion iż-Żubina:

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Żubina, do you remember me? I had come to you [your house in Malta] with Lulitu … I had brought you a bunch of CDs from il-Bukkaċċ, Peter … For the little that I know you, I enjoyed your company. If someday you would like to come here, there are many people who would welcome you … So for the little that I know you, any time you want, when you want to come here [to his home] you’re welcome.

This extract also reveals how diasporic recordings may be delivered in face-to-face transactions. Posting recordings between Malta and its diaspora has occurred for decades (often mediated by a handful of daqqqaqa or dilettanti who act as ‘nodes’ through which communication and exchange networks inevitably pass); however, it is also common for Maltese-Australians on a return visit to Malta (or vice versa) to be laden with recordings and instructions as to their delivery. These face-to-face encounters are important occasions that are vital for confirming the bonds between members of distant ġhana communities. If Żeppi from Sydney is instructed to take a number of CDs to Joe in Żabbar, these two individuals, who may only know of one another via such recordings, will come into physical contact, thereby strengthening the community as a whole. Symbolically, the gift of a CD or DVD that has made the journey ‘back home’ to Malta has value to Maltese there; and the CD or DVD that has ‘emigrated’ to Australia becomes part of the Maltese migrant narrative.

Although ġhana has recently begun to have a presence on the Internet, the exchange of physical media persists and remains the primary way in which daqqqaqa share recordings with each other.¹⁰⁸ The sociability of exchanging recordings as physical gifts – as objects that can be written on, passed hand-to-hand and placed on

¹⁰⁸ A number of ġhana recordings have been uploaded to YouTube since 2012 by a small number of dilettanti.
shelves – is as important as the music and messages encoded into the media itself. These “sound souvenirs” are preserved by individuals who desire the ability to replay and recreate the music they cherish and to hear voices and sounds that have meaning to them (Bijsterveldt and Dijck 2009:11). As Impey points out, a “bloodless mp3 file sent over the Internet” is devoid of the symbolic value and presence of physical media and its exchange networks, lacking the tangibility of objects “which can be stored in a collection, as one would a box of letters or postcards, and proudly produced as a bag of memorabilia that tells the story of your life and relationships” (Impey 2013:206-207).

Indeed, although audio recordings of ghana occasions are typically made on an mp3 device today, these recordings almost always end up on physical CDs. The Internet may well become a sharing platform of the future, but only if the modes of sociability that surround the physical sharing of recordings can somehow be replicated through it.109

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed how ghana is transmitted by its communities and, conversely, how notions of community are transmitted by ghana. Those individuals who are present at a live ghana performance extract from it and invest in it those elements of communality that reflect their needs in the moment and the nature of the spaces in which these performances are occurring: masculine tussles for social standing in Johnny’s Bar, negotiations of Maltese-Australian identity in Klabb Għannejja Maltin, confirming bonds of a close-knit community in the Sydney house party, and preserving transnational friendships between kitarristi by sharing music and messages with one

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109 Many Maltese and Maltese-Australians use Skype for keeping in contact; however, streaming technology has not yet become a viable format for live collaborative performances across the diaspora, despite some attempts in recent years. One-way streams from a bar in Malta to a club in Melbourne have been attempted a handful of times, but daqqaqa did not deem them particularly successful. As Internet bandwidth improves, I predict that live ghana sessions conducted between daqqaqa in Malta and Australia will become a popular activity.
another via audio-visual media. By broadening my focus in this chapter to include ghana spirtu pront and the wider ghana community, I have better illustrated the position of kitarristi within their contextual framework: kitarristi exist in a subset of the ghana community, their sociability and behaviours mirroring values which are shared among a much broader group. The communities which form around ghana share its musical performances and its host of associated social activities and behavioural norms as an aggregating symbol of their collective identity, but not all who engage with ghana invest in it in similar ways. As Benedict Anderson suggests, communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined as much as by anything more concrete (Anderson 2006:6). Ghana can be seen to manifest both real and imagined relationships: relationships between individuals in physical environments and in technology-mediated ones, and relationships with conceptions of Maltese identity that are informed by historic and nostalgic constructions of the past and of the past’s significance in the present. Through the act of performance ghana forges together a variety of significant symbols to itself become a complex, aggregate symbol of Maltese identity that can be used and interpreted in a great number of ways by those who music together through it.

Audio-visual recordings play a number of critical roles in facilitating the relationships and transmissions of culture and identity that are addressed in this chapter. Consumer recording technology provides an individual with the means to capture and transmit musical performances at will for the benefit of those who are either not able to be present for a performance or who wish to revisit it in the future, thereby overcoming and controlling the ephemerality of live performance. Sharing these recordings with others confirms relationships and bonds between people and places, bringing individuals into physical contact and ultimately sustaining musical practices (as also detailed in chapter three). Messages that are encoded into these media, either spoken or else
inferred symbolically from the sonic or visual frame of the recorded occasion, further contribute to sustaining the relationships that are brought into being or confirmed through sharing the physical recording. Recordings also provide an alternative means to consume *ghana* beyond the live performance context, presenting the owner of a recording with the opportunity to engage with a performance in a different context to that in which it was made (in a car, in a kitchen, on a Walkman or iPod), whilst also affording him control over temporality via the ability to pause and rewind the recording, or to enjoy a performance that was made before he was born. Finally, recordings permit one to express subjective demonstrations of taste: which kind of recordings does one collect, and why? To own a recording infers a particular connection to the performance encoded on it – a connection that reveals a set of relationships and predilections that links one to the *ghana* community as a whole.
CONCLUSION
In this thesis I have identified the tangible and intangible components that comprise the prejjem tradition and described the array of modes and conditions by which these socio-musical objects are transmitted within (and between) ghana communities of Malta and Australia. By taking an interdisciplinary and multimodal approach to examining the totality of the ghana community from the perspective of the kitarristi, I have shown how people, spaces, symbols, activities and interactions are interconnected and support each other. Throughout this thesis I have presented a great deal of original scholarship on prejjem based on extensive ethnographic research that I conducted among communities of kitarristi in Malta and Australia. To this data I have applied a number of innovative concepts and models which have afforded fresh approaches to the study of prejjem and ghana as social and musical phenomena, the most prominent of which I summarise below.

In chapter one I considered the guitar as a physical object into which are embedded layers of symbolism. How many of these layers are recognised by an observer is a reflection of his or her degree of investment in the ghana community. By examining the symbolic narratives that are inscribed into Maltese guitars by luthiers and kitarristi, I have revealed how the ghana community encodes its history and values into the physical form of their instruments. In chapter two I detailed the history of prejjem, provided an account of the musical system of the guitar ensemble and described the roles and ideals that underpin performances of prejjem. I also examined how prim kitarristi improvise within the tradition, developing a taxonomy of melody types, and evidencing the canonic nature of prejjem’s melodic and stylistic repertoire and the schools of playing within which these motifs and techniques have been developed. In chapter three I constructed a five-stage model of learning that took into consideration the various relationships and environments through which musical knowledge (and social behaviours) are transmitted and evaluated by student kitarristi. Identifying the
existence of a liminal phase of learning within this model and determining how it affords a prim kitarrist special status within the ghana community has revealed a profitable area of study that has the potential for application in other fields of research. In chapter four I compared three performances of ghana spirtu pront from Malta and Australia – this being the first study of ghana to take an international comparative approach – to illustrate the role of space in affecting the dynamic between musical performance and the presentation and negotiation of Maltese identities. In this chapter I also examined the previously unresearched topic of privately made audio-visual recordings of ghana and prejjem occasions, uncovering a medium through which diasporic communities of daqqqaqa have transmitted music and messages to one another for nearly sixty years.

Each of these chapters has focused on a particular aspect of ghana’s guitar culture and examined how its constituent components are transmitted within the ghana community. These components have not, however, been treated in isolation, since knowledge – the ‘object’ that is ultimately being transmitted in each instance – rarely resides in (or is drawn from) a single source. Rather, as I have shown, knowledge is distributed across the ghana community in the form of a patchwork held together by the threads of human transactions which bind members of this community together. Access to certain knowledge is only achieved by engaging in sociability with those individuals who carry it. It is useful to briefly reflect on the term “carry” to consider how this knowledge is suspended within the ghana community. The Oxford English dictionary (online) defines the verb “carry” as “to support and move (something) from one place to another”, or to “transport, conduct or transmit”. Motion is an essential quality of this term, inferring that whilst the object being carried may have an origin and a destination it nevertheless exists in a state of transference. In the case of the ghana community, this transference proceeds through the conduit of human agency. As such, knowledge is in a
constant state of modification (or potential modification) according to the individual through which it is passing. In other words, the ideas and objects that constitute this knowledge have the potential to transform during their transmission. To transmit an idea or an object inevitably leads to its recontextualisation. Whether the recontextualised material will maintain unity with its ‘source’ is dependent on the quality of the transmission and the individual and communal attitudes toward the material that is being transmitted. As I detail below, I have evidenced a close relationship between transmission and transformation in each of my chapters.

In chapter one I considered guitars as physical and symbolic objects that embody and transmit biographies, community histories and aesthetic ideals. Following a guitar’s trajectory through the ghana community reveals relationships that are dynamically negotiated between the instruments and their creators, their users and their observers. The transformative elements of this dynamic are twofold. Firstly, imported materials and the design attributes of foreign instruments are fused with Maltese aesthetics to produce an identifiably localised version of the guitar, providing us with an insight into the ghana community’s construction of self and other via cultural borrowing. Secondly, guitars transform from functional objects into symbolic ones by being associated with significant luthiers and kitarristi. These transformations are perpetual – a guitar continues to acquire history and significance as it is used and observed in performance contexts. Furthermore, a Maltese guitar can embody the personality of its maker and owner(s) to such a degree that it becomes a material memorial to them upon their deaths, after which these particular guitars may transform into supernaturally-charged symbolic objects.

Chapter two examined the formation and transmission of prejjem’s style norms as aesthetic canons that are closely tied to particularly significant modifications to the tradition established by a small number of influential prim kitarristi. However, in this
chapter I was also concerned with revealing those elements of *prejjem* which resist transformation, namely the *akkumpanjament* component and the structural norms that it represents. Conceiving of modifications to *prejjem* as occurring in a “kaleidoscope of change”, after Herndon (1971:166), drew attention to how an underlying structural stability can enable significant surface level variations to occur – the *prim kitarrist’s* domain. At the heart of the transmission of style, then, is a dynamic between stability and change. Although it is *prim kitarristi* who choose how to develop *prejjem*, ultimately it is the *ghana* community’s reactions to these transformations that dictate whether they will be retained as accepted evolutions of the tradition or discarded as divergent anomalies.

In chapter three I revealed the processes by which an individual transforms into an active participant in the *ghana* community (specifically as a *kitarrist*), observing how his status evolves as he negotiates a trajectory through the community by learning its socio-musical norms. I detailed how the face-to-face methods of transmission that feature in a *kitarrist’s* early stages of learning later become augmented (for a *prim* student) by more private modes of learning that occur outside of previously established modes of sociability. Recordings play a significant role in this private realm, affording the *prim* student a liminal, almost magical space in which he may transform into a proficient *prim kitarrist*. As I evidenced in the chapter, as the context of a transmission changes so too does the potential for its socio-musical content to transform. The content of transmissions that manifest within the realm of sociability tend to retain uniformity: source and destination forms remain similar due largely to the continuous evaluative framework that is provided by face-to-face social environments. In these kind of encounters, an *akkumpanjist* learns fundamental chord sequences, subtle embellishments and the conservation techniques that are necessary to facilitate *ghana* performances; whilst a *prim kitarrist* learns practical performance techniques and
develops prejjem melodies that are largely imitative of the style of those prim kitarristi close to him. When a prim student moves beyond face-to-face modes of sociability in his learning – via recordings and observing prim kitarristi from a distance – he is likely to develop a more distinctive, idiosyncratic approach to style that may push the boundaries of the tradition.

In the first part of chapter four I refocused on the ghana community from a broader perspective, identifying how the physical and conceptual frame of an ghana performance affects how it is manifested and, inversely, how everyday spaces are transformed by ghana performances. In the last part of the chapter I detailed how daqqaqa in Maltese and Australian ghana communities have maintained contact with one another over the past sixty years through the medium of recordings. Whereas in chapter three such recordings provided student kitarristi with source material with which to develop their own musical innovations, in this communicative transmission context the prolific circulation of these recordings has resulted in ghana’s socio-musical norms developing along remarkably similar, stable lines in Malta and across its diaspora. In this chapter, as in chapter one, transformations are of a subtle, symbolic nature. Everyday spaces and objects within the performance frame (whether experienced live or via a recording) are found to transform in meaning according to who is viewing them and in what context. Furthermore, the presence of certain objects or individuals within this frame can transform an everyday space into a performance space: guitars, microphones, audio-visual recording devices and daqqaqa themselves. A more overt transformation also occurs as an individual enters the performative space of the stage, where his role transforms from that of a lay community member to that of a daqqaq.

Almost all of the interactions I examined in this thesis occur in face-to-face transactions (a notable characteristic of sociability in small-scale societies): for example
acquiring a Maltese guitar, learning the social and musical norms of the tradition or sharing recordings. However, those transmissions and transformations that occur outside of this framework are those which often have the most far-reaching effects – namely, learning prejjem privately via recordings. Audio-visual recordings are a fundamental component of the ġhana tradition: they provide the community with a means to document their tradition, they enable students to learn styles and techniques beyond the limits of their immediate social circles, they suture geographic dislocation and their circulation facilitates real-world relationships. However, ġhana communities remain discrete ‘islands’ despite a high degree of interaction between them via the medium of recordings. In Australia, for example, so great are the distances between Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide that ġhana communities there are as relatively isolated from one another as they are from Malta, or from North American emigrant communities in Toronto and Detroit. Many daqqaqa in Australia claim they are more likely to travel to Malta, to “home”, to play ġhana than to visit other diasporic communities for this purpose. Links to Malta are strong, but links between Malta’s satellite diasporic communities are not.110 Ġhana communities are also islands in terms of their being surrounded by ‘others’ – where these others may be identified as other nationalities, or other Maltese who are not invested in ġhana. Whilst these musical communities may be isolated in their geographic distribution, they all ascribe to similar cultural attitudes and share a common body of socio-musical resources. What differs in each location (and in each performance context) are the boundaries by which each of these communities identify themselves as distinct from other local community groups and the manner in which they frame and interpret their performance activities. Each

110 An exception to this is the link between Melbourne and Sydney, whose daqqaqa mix once or twice a year. Ray Attard, for example, visited Melbourne from Sydney on a brief work trip in July 2014, making the most of his free time to play with friends; and in March 2014 a group of six daqqaqa from Melbourne visited Sydney for a weekend to perform in a Maltese club there.
performance occasion uniquely responds to the particular problems and challenges of those ‘islanders’ who participate in it (after Dawe 2004b:7).

In the introduction to this thesis I drew attention to two questions that Kevin Dawe raised in his book on island musics: “What is the effect of island life … upon the musical imagination of a community?” and “What role does the musical imagination play in the construction and interpretation of islander life, and in the expression of islander sentiments and sensibilities?” (ibid.:1). In regard to ġhana and prejjem, I propose that insularity is the key characteristic factor that determines the musical imagination of ġhana communities and their sense of self. Ġhana’s close-knit community frameworks which enable the transmission of socio-musical knowledge via small-scale, face-to-face interactions regulate processes of change and maintain accepted musical forms and attitudes toward performances rather than encouraging more radical transformations. Changes to the established norms of ġhana and prejjem are slow and are vetted by its community. Members of these communities do not have a desire to commoditise their activities or seek recognition from those beyond it. Indeed, ġhana’s entire system of cultural production and consumption occurs within the boundaries of its community: guitars and recordings are made by and circulated among members of the ġhana community, performances are arranged by oganajżers in everyday venues (larger ġhana events, such as festivals, are also often mediated by an ġhana oganajżer) and musical knowledge remains stored in the minds of practitioners. Nevertheless, foreign ideas and technologies have been incorporated into the tradition – ranging from the obvious, such as the harp guitar, to the more discreet, such as the use of a plectrum. Crucially, however, these elements have been reconciled with local norms by influential members of the ġhana community. Through the agency of these individuals, such appropriations are evaluated as ‘local’ modifications to the ġhana tradition and therefore maintain the illusion of community insularity. These instances of
transformation reflect the kind of dynamic cultural borrowing that permeates Maltese culture more generally, ultimately confirming ghana as a “living tradition” (after Sant Cassia 2000:291).

Over the past thirty years there have been a number of attempts by broadcasters and scholars to popularise ghana among a broader audience: regular television programmes featuring ghana have aired since the 1980s, annual national ghana festivals staged since the late 1990s have drawn large local and foreign audiences, and a handful of informative books and CD packages have been produced more recently. Yet, the general Maltese public (and international audiences) have not engaged with ghana in more active ways. The trickle of new blood into ghana is mostly ‘old-blood’ – that is, it belongs to the kin of existing participants. As the average age of the ghana community’s members continues to rise, we face the question of what the future might hold for ghana. Whilst some daqqaqa are in their teens and twenties, most (like the vast majority of their audience) are in their fifties and over. In modern Malta and Australia, young men have many other social attractions available to them that compete for their time alongside work and family commitments. In Australia this problem is compounded by the fact that those Australia-born generations with Maltese heritage often experience cultural and linguistic alienation from their Malta-born parents (or grandparents) and, therefore, from ghana as a form of sociability (see Cauchi 1999:62-74; 2014:6-7, 13; Klein 2005b; York 1998:83). All of the ghannejja that I have met in Australia were born in Malta, not Australia, and all have excellent Maltese language skills. These generational divisions may inevitably lead to Maltese-Australian ghana ceasing to exist in its current forms within the next two or three decades.\footnote{Such foreboding predictions for ghana have been made in the past, however, and have failed to come true (Cassar Pullicino 1961:69; Casha in Agius 2001:300-301).}

Ghana is in a more stable condition in Malta, although it is not expanding at an appreciable rate. The future of
prejjem may be somewhat brighter as, unlike ghana more generally, prejjem does not require Maltese language ability in order to engage with it. Prejjem is also compatible with modern forms of popular music-making: kitarri biss pieces are short, tonal and encourage virtuosity, presenting guitarists with a technical and improvisational challenge not unlike that of flamenco, fado or jazz. Furthermore, prejjem is performed on a familiar, readily accessible instrument. Encouragingly, over the past two decades a small number of excellent Australia-born kitarristi have emerged. It must be noted, however, that these individuals are all closely related to active ghana community members and, therefore, had regular and intimate access to performance occasions and daqqafa in their formative years.

I believe that the stimulus for prejjem’s future regeneration will take place via the reach of audio-visual recordings. Over the past two or three years dilettanti have begun to upload recordings of ghana and prejjem to YouTube and SoundCloud – online platforms which emancipate these recordings from their conventional networks of face-to-face, hand-to-hand distribution. Although these transmissions are devoid of the intense social interactions that characterise the ghana community (and which are part of the draw of performance occasions), they do allow a potentially vast audience to encounter prejjem. Whether these viewers subsequently choose to engage in person with the sociability of the ghana community and its tangled web of ethnicity, masculinity, culture and language is open to question. Yet, engaging with this broad community is not necessarily a requirement for engaging with prejjem specifically. Most of the top kitarristi in Malta and Australia in fact prefer to play in private environments, away from ghannejja and the wider ghana community. During these occasions relationships between kitarristi are fostered by their shared love of the guitar and its music, rather than by broader notions of Maltese ethnicity and identity. It is in these environments that I believe prejjem will continue to survive and thrive.


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Casha, M., 2014d. Extracts of unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Manuel Casha.


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