

Bobbin lace. It's economic and social role on Gozo

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S U M M A R Y

Lace making is a traditional art on the Island of Gozo and many Gozitans are extremely proud of their unique and valued bobbin lace works. Lace not only once fulfilled an economic role within the lives of the Gozitans; it also had a significant social aspect to fulfill. On present day Gozo, handmade lace has not retained its important economic role as it has been replaced in the recent past with factory and tourist related jobs; as well as the fact that the price of lace has not kept up with the cost to weave these intricate pieces. Not only is the reasons for the decline in lace's economic function a focus, so is whether or not this art form will continue after the current older generation of Gozitans are gone. This is an important question to be asked since Gozitan lace is distinctive from any other form of lace and it is a highly prized item by Gozitan and foreigners alike. The capacity in which lace will continue is significant and what is being done by the people themselves to save this art form is also taken into consideration.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Methodology

In the summer of 2006, from July 27 to August 13, I was on the Island of Gozo, which is part of the Maltese Islands in the Mediterranean, doing Anthropological research regarding the role of lace on Gozo. Through my research, I discovered the roles lace once fulfilled; how it came to be on Gozo, as well as trying to discover how the art relates to the life of modern, 21st Century, Gozitans. In my efforts to gain answers to these questions I visited different shops, where lace was sold, on the island; mainly in Marsalforn and Victoria. I spoke with the people who were running the stores and asked for their views on lace and whether they thought the art was declining in the numbers learning the handicraft. Most of these discussions were informal, thereby allowing the interviewees to lead the conversation. However, in one instance I went into a store with prepared questions and conducted the interview in a more structured manner. This form of questioning only occurred after I had already interviewed the shopkeeper, and they in fact asked for me to bring replanned questions to the next interview.

Keywords

Lace, Gozo, Maltese Islands, tourists, economy, cultural continuation, crafts, ethnography

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Besides talking with shopkeepers who sold lace, I also interviewed one woman who makes lace products. I did this in order to gain some insight into how the lace weavers themselves view the art of lace and its connection to tourists. I also gathered secondary information from two books written by a woman who is a native to Gozo and a great proponent for the continuation of the art. Consiglia Azzopardi is a recognized authority of lace on Gozo and I came across her name several times while in the process of gathering information on the subject.

I must caution all readers of this article about some of the limitations of this paper before hand so that they are aware of them before they begin to read. One of the first, and major ones, is the limited time with which I had to gather the primary information. I was only able to be on the Island of Gozo for a few weeks, because of this the research is more limited than I would have preferred. One of the consequences of my short stay on Gozo was that I was not able to gather information on lace from as many sources or from as many perspectives as I would have liked. Another problem area was that it took me most of my time on Gozo to find an informant who had the time and the willingness to answer my questions about lace. Because of all of the help that he gave me, I would like to personally thank Manuel "Lela" Mizzi. I am also aware that the history section on lace could easily have taken up a larger amount of space but as it relates to this paper, the history of who brought and influenced lacework on Gozo is only needed in order to provide a basic understanding of its past. Keeping these limitations in mind, I present the following article and hope that it will give you some insight into the role of lacework on Gozo.

Brief History of Lace on Gozo

It is believed that bobbin lace was brought to the Maltese Islands by the Knights of Saint John. The Order of Saint John was given the Maltese Islands as their new home base in 1530 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The Maltese Islands were gifted to the Order because they had been chased out of the Island of Rhodes by the Turks in 1522. Bobbin lace, the first type of lace introduced to the Maltese Islands, had been flourishing in several Italian and Flemish cities; it was from one of these areas the Knights first acquired the habit of using lace (Azzopardi, 1992; 9). Upon their arrival the knights began importing lace to Malta from Northern Europe; the lace pieces were sewn onto ceremonial dress and church vestments. During the rule of the Order of Saint John women on the islands learned how to weave the lace previously imported to the islands and by the mid-

dle of the 17th Century their lace began to rival the pieces made in Genoa and Belgium. Throughout the history of Maltese lace there have been many peaks and valleys in the sale and production of lace but there have been several people who played significant roles in reviving the art of lace throughout its history.

In the early 1800s an English noblewoman, Lady Hamilton Chichester, brought Genoese lace workers to the islands to help revive and spread the practice of weaving lace (ibid; 13). But for the first three decades of the 1800s there was a depression in the Maltese Islands which almost led to the extinction of lace work (ibid; 10). Luckily lace once again was brought back from near extinction by a woman around 1864; this is also when Gozitan lace patterns diverged from those used on Malta. This process began when a priest, Dun Gwanna Curmi, brought a narrow strip of lace to Gozo from Genoa. The priest then gave this piece of lace to Marjanna Attard, the daughter of a local police inspector. Marjanna studied the lace carefully and taught herself, and her sister Ginisja, how to replicate the style. But then Marjanna took it one step farther by beginning to create her own patterns and experimenting with making wider pieces of lace. From there she taught the patterns to other young women; who would sell their pieces in order to get extra money (ibid; 13). Although Marjana died young, her sister Grinisja continued what she had started by developing new stitches and teaching others the new styles.

But even while these women were influential in the continuation and evolution of bobbin lace on Gozo, the person who contributed the most to the revival of lace was in fact a local parish priest, Dun Guzepp Diacono. Beginning in the early 1860s, Diacono used the lace as a means to try and help alleviate some of the poverty faced by the people living on Gozo. Diacono was aware of the poverty faced by the Gozitans of his time, so he promoted lace making in an effort to keep girls in large families occupied and to improve the families income by offering another way of earning money or goods (Azzopardi, 1998; 7); the lace makers would barter lace for food or clothing. It was Diacono who set up the first Casa de Industriale in Xaghra and then in Rabat (Victoria). This was the first official industrialization of lace work; as prior to this the industry of lace making was on the family level, with individuals working in family units to produce lacework on a part time basis. The Casa de Industriale held classes for teaching lace work; Diacono designed many of the patterns used, he is most well known for his geometric designs.



Image 1: By Foster, Adrienne. Josephine with brace. Marsalforn, 2006.



Image 2: By Foster, Adrienne. Intricate Lace. Lela Mizzi, Gozo, 2006.

All of these people and events helped to shape present day bobbin lace on Gozo and without the contribution of these, and many other individuals, Gozitan lace would be quite different than it is today. The other possibility being that Gozitan lace might not even exist if it weren't for the contributions made by these people. In the following pages I will discuss modern bobbin lace and its place in Gozitan society; how the role of lace changed within Gozitan society and economy; and the viewpoint as to whether or not lace making will continue to be actively practiced by the women of Gozo.

Lace in Relation to Gozo

Before presenting the role that lace played, and now plays, within the society and economy of Gozo it is important to obtain a rudimentary understanding of the steps and the hours of work required to weave each piece of lace. The procedure for lace making is an involved multi step process. Before the weaving begins a design for the lace piece must either be copied or created. In the past this involved the arduous process of re-drawing a design every time a person wished to use it; as pins are stuck in the designs as markers for the bobbins. Nowadays most weavers photocopy the designs and stick the pins into these copies, to map the design out, before the weaving process begins; this cuts down on some of the labor put into making lace. The designs are normally passed down through a person's family, although now there are also design books from which people can obtain designs for pieces of lace or draw their own if they so desire.

The thread and linen used in these works are all bought from Ireland, as the Gozitans believe that Irish linen is the best in the world; especially for the more expensive table cloths. However, the silk used, in some lace embroidery, is synthetic. Lace work is normally made in several pieces and then sewn together to make the finished product; even the smaller pieces are made in this way. The reason for doing piece work, or *Kuxxunata(i)* as it is called in Maltese, is because thicker pieces will not fit on the brace (View image 1), therefore, the lace is made in separate pieces. The design is repeated for each piece and then sewn together; in the past attachments were hand done by the nuns on Gozo but they do not do it any more. Instead a machine is now used to connect the lace pieces together, as well to connect these pieces to the linen in the work, if there is any. Using a machine to attach the pieces makes the lace work stronger and easier to wash; it is also less time consuming than hand stitching the entire piece. The store owners who sell lace buy their pieces, not as a

whole product, but in the number of individual pieces made by the women. For example, the shop owners might pay 50 cents per section of lace work, these sections are then joined together to form the whole piece by the proprietor of the store or by an employee. As is apparent in the example price listed above, the monetary return for lace work is not high and the amount of money received is not what most people would view as being enough for the number of hours spent on making these pieces, especially the more intricate designs (see Image 2). Some designs require 100 bobbins to be used and even a decent bookmark requires 2-3 hours of weaving and in most instances only sell for 1 lira. As has already been mentioned lace work was originally done so that women could earn money and either keep it for themselves or help to supplement the income brought in by the men in their family. Before WWII women on Gozo did not go outside of the house to work, the only way for them to earn extra money, and to pass the time, was to do lacework. Women would barter with the lace for the products they could not grow or harvest, such as clothing, tools, sugar and other such necessities. The lace would then be sold to foreigners, especially the British since there were many on the islands at the time.

During "The War", as Gozitans call World War II, there was a great need for the extra income that lacework could bring into the family, as many of the men could not find work to support their families. During this time the women would work by gas lights so that they could produce more lace at a quicker rate than the normal practice of simply working when there was sunlight and extra time. Maria Mizzi, a local wholesaler and dealer in Maltese bobbin lace, told me a story about one woman whose husband would wind the bobbins for her so she could work faster and produce more lace; thereby making more money for the family. This important economic role that lace had during and prior to WWII was displaced when factories came to Gozo following WWII. Since employment was now available at the factories fewer people learned how to make lace as it was no longer an economic necessity. This, in part, explains why some people now go to the lace schools and classes; because they could not learn how to make lace from the older women in their family since they themselves did not know how to make lace.

In order to discover how lacework has been affected by the factories and increased tourism on Gozo I asked shop owners and one lace weaver how and if tourism and tourists have had an effect on lace and what, if any, was the impact of lace making factories on Gozo to the sale of lace. The areas that interested me the most, with regards to tourists, was if they



Image 3: By Foster, Adrienne. Gozo Bobbin Lace Label. 2006.



Image 4: By Foster, Adrienne. Maltese Cross Pattern. Gozo, 2006.

had any impact on what designs are made and if tourists play a role in the continuation or decline of lacework itself.

One of the first things I discovered by following this line of questioning was that the numbers of tourists visiting the Maltese Islands have been on the decline for the past ten years. The reason for this decline has been because of an increased competition with other countries for these tourists; who are mostly from Europe, Russia, and Australia. Because of this decline in tourists some, such as Josephine, a 60ish year old woman who lives in Marsalforn and weaves lace, do not make lace very much any more; as she only weaves so that she can sell what she makes to the tourists. Josephine explained to me, as did some shop owners in the area, that most of the people visiting Marsalforn were Gozitans and Maltese who only come to Marsalforn in the summer to enjoy the sea, and that no one visits Marsalforn in the winter; instead they all go to Victoria, which is farther inland. Since a majority of the tourists in Marsalforn are from the Maltese Islands very few actually buy the pieces of lace being offered in the shops along the sea front.

In other areas of Gozo, where the tourists are not primarily from the islands, there is still a dearth in the number of tourists buying lace products. One reason for this is the increased selling of machine made and imported lacework. For around ten years there have been machines on Gozo that are used for the manufacturing of laceworks; my informant was unsure as to how long lace has been imported from China. The importation and the manufacture of lace goods by machine began because it is easier to obtain machine made pieces of lace than handmade pieces. The reason for this is that hand making lace is a labor intensive process and it is dependent upon finding skilled individuals who are willing to sell their produce at the desired prices. It is also possible to have continuous access to machine made lace while there are not always handmade pieces available when shops want to sell them to the tourists; or the shop owner might not have the particular design or style the shopper desires. For all of these reasons, convenience, accessibility, and especially greed because the sellers gain more of a profit from the machine lace since the manufacturing and buying costs are cheaper than hand made, machine products have been sold by people on Gozo. When asked if their lace is real they will state that it is "Gozo Lace"; thereby leaving the buyer to come to their own conclusions as to its origins and veracity.

The increased sale of imported and machine made pieces of lace has, in turn, hurt the sale of lace on Gozo. Since people do not know if the lace that they are considering buying is hand-made or not, they will not buy any pieces, as they

are unsure of its authenticity. This uncertainty has hurt the lace industry, especially for those wholesalers and dealers who are only selling original hand made lace.

Even though this has hurt the sale of lace the government is not doing anything to prevent the importation of lace or even the machine manufacturing of it that is occurring on the Island of Gozo itself. Lace wholesalers and dealers, such as Lela, whose wife Maria, owns two lace shops in Victoria, have gone to the Government minister to complain about these issues and explain how it is hurting business, but still nothing is being done to prevent the importation or machine manufacturing of lace on Gozo.

In an effort to counteract the harm done to the industry by these imposters some people, such as Lela and Maria Mizzi, are trying to educate buyers as to how they can tell machine made lace from hand made lace. Some ways to tell hand made lace from machine made pieces is that machine made products are thicker in thread, stiffer then, and not as shiny as handmade lace. Also the lack of imperfections should make the shopper suspicious as to the authenticity and legitimacy of the lacework. When an individual produces a piece of lace there will always be some slight imperfections, as it is nearly impossible for someone to make every detail exactly the same throughout. The imperfections and the different styles of weaving being used in the piece can also indicate who made a certain piece; their signature if you will. For instance, the flower is the most difficult design to perfect in lace making, by looking for imperfections in the petals design it will prove as to whether or not a piece of lace is hand or machine made, as well as indicating to the experienced eye the individual who made that particular piece of lace. These imperfections will normally be missing in pieces that are made by machines. As an extra guarantee Lela and Maria put stickers on each lacework that says "Handmade Gozo Bobbin Lace", they are the only store on Gozo that I saw do this (View Image 3).

Besides economic impacts, I was also interested in whether tourists were having an impact on what lace pieces were being made and the designs being used on these items. Tablecloths, dollies, bookmarks, end table covers, and other small items were what I normally saw being sold in the stores on Gozo. The smaller items were more common, with the more expensive items, such as full sized tablecloths, being less commonly shown in stores that did not specialize in selling lace. I was told that dollies with Maltese Crosses and small lace borders are preferred by many tourists although the German tourists do not like the Maltese Cross and will not buy any lace that has the design on it (View Image 4). The shop owner believed that was because the

Maltese Cross reminded the German tourists of the Nazis. Although the tourists tend to prefer certain designs, such as the Maltese Cross or the flowers, Lela did not believe the tourists had any real influence on what lace was being made.

His belief is based on the fact that the Maltese Cross is a common design on lace as it is a traditional Maltese design that has appeared on many pieces for hundreds of years, therefore it would continue to be made whether the tourists were there or not. Although some shop owners, such as Lela's wife Maria, will suggest to the women doing the work to make certain designs, because they are running low on the item or it is in high demand, they do not make the women do any particular design; it is always the weavers choice as to what design they use when making lace, according to Lela.

Even though Lela told me that the tourists do not influence the designs being used, I believe that tourists do in fact influence the pieces being made specifically for the purpose of selling. For example, if all tourists refused to buy the lace work that had Maltese Crosses in their designs, not just the German tourists, then these would be unsellable and the stores selling lace to the tourists would no longer buy the lace with the Maltese Cross within the patterns, as these pieces would just sit on their shelves. This would then be comparable to what happened to the Navajo's blanket designs following World War Two. In that instance the Navajos had to stop putting a symbol that looked like the swastika to the people buying the items. To the Navajos however, this symbol represented the circle of life and not Hitler or the Nazis, but because the traders were not willing to buy the blankets that contained these symbols, as they could not sell these to their customers; the Navajos had to stop weaving this design into the blankets they were going to sell. In the Navajo case they did have to change the designs they put on their art works in order to continue to sell them.

Unlike the Navajo symbol the designs on Gozo lace do not have any symbols that affect people to the extent that the Navajo symbol of life did to the people of the U.S. following WWII. If Gozitan lace did have such designs then I believe that they would have been forced to change the traditional bobbin lace designs in order to be able to continue to sell the pieces. What is desired by the tourists, be it design or shape of a work of lace, will affect what is being made, even if only slightly and even if it goes unnoticed by those who are adapting their handicraft so that it will become more saleable. My informant, Lela, believed that tourists had no effect on the traditional bobbin lace designs because these changes have been so slight as to have gone unnoticed to even those involved in the process and sale of lace.

Some of the ways in which tourists have affected the making of lace is that tourists can ask for a traditional design to be made in a certain shape and the store owner, Lela Mizzi, will draw up the designs for the order, changing certain parts, but leaving the traditional symbols. By being willing to custom make/design lacework this shop owner is changing and influencing, if only slightly, the way in which the women weaving make their lace. It is upon request, and for the hope of a sale, that these pieces are designed and made for a particular person and not just for anyone wanting to buy lace. By doing this the store proprietor is catering to the customer or tourist and letting them influence what is being made by the weaver. Another area that can be affected is the area of time required to make the lace. Most tourists prefer finer lace with a double layer of stitching, which takes more time and therefore is more expensive. The lace weavers and sellers know this and because of this knowledge will make more pieces that are double stitched than they might have otherwise. Double stitching is stitching the design more than once and it causes the design to be raised up off of the linen. Double stitching requires more time and by taking extra time to do the process the weaver can not make as many items as they could have if they were only single stitching the design. But budget is also a factor when buying lacework and it will determine what people buy, so the wholesalers are likely to urge the weavers not to make too many large pieces that are too expensive; some of the highest quality lace can cost as much as 613 lira (\$1,800). Because of this high price weavers instead focus more of their efforts towards making good quality pieces that are smaller and more affordable for the buyers.

By making pieces solely to please and attract the tourist or other customers, such as people desiring gifts for conferences held on the island, means that the makers of lace are not making whatever designs or styles they want to at the moment. Instead they are weaving what they think the most people will buy; even if they are tired of making bookmark after bookmark or using the same design on every piece. By catering what is made to the tastes of the target audience, the foreign tourists in this instance, the weavers and retailers earn more money than they would if they did not take these areas into consideration when making or selling lace. None of the above examples have significantly changed the bobbin lace of Gozo, as the designs and pieces are relatively the same, but tourists do influence what is most commonly made by weavers who make lace for the purpose of selling to others. The shop owner was right however in his statement that tourists do not affect what is being made if one is only considering the laceworks being done that are not for sale.

Besides discovering whether or not tourists influenced lace, I also wanted to know the probability that lace would continue to be produced on Gozo. As I spoke with the store owners about this topic I encountered conflicting opinions on the subject. One shop owner said the craft would die with the older generation while another stated that it was starting to revive and that larger numbers of younger women were learning how to weave lace. The question to consider here however is not whether the craft itself will survive but whether the selling of lace to tourists will survive after the older generation is gone. The reason for this distinction is because while more people are learning how to weave lace that does not mean that they will be willing to sell their lace at the same price that it is sold to the tourists now. The older women of Gozo are willing to sell their work at a lower price than the younger women of Gozo because the older women simply do it as a hobby and to earn a little cash on the side. The younger women however have to concentrate most of their time on raising families and earning enough money to help support said families. So with this taken into consideration I would agree with the store owner who believed that when the older generation is gone lacework will go with them and no more will be sold. However, this does not mean the craft itself will come to an end only that one aspect of the craft, the economic section directed at tourists, will come to an end with the death of the older generations. One of the wholesalers with whom I spoke is preparing for this fall in access to goods by stocking up on handmade lace since the people making the lace are elderly and the supply is limited. Therefore they buy lace when they see good work in preparation for a time when lace pieces will become scarcer. This time is fast approaching as the average age of a lace worker is 70 years old; some are even in their 90s.

The reason why younger women are not doing lacework full time and earning a living that way is because no one can support themselves, let alone a family, solely on the sale of lace. The average amount of money earned per hour when doing lacework is 20 cents. For one thing the cost of supplies has risen in the recent past; about 20 years ago it cost one Lira to buy a bobbin of thread whereas it now costs around six Liras. Lela and Maria, try to prevent the rise in thread price from causing their lace providers to stop weaving by providing their workers with thread or for those who still prefer to buy their own they will sell the thread to them at cost so that it is cheaper. Besides the increased cost in thread, the amount of time it normally takes to make even a small, less intricate piece of lace is significant enough that weavers can only produce small amounts of lace at a time. The amount of time it takes compared to the money earned does not encourage

people to continue to make lace for sale when they now have other options open to them as to how they can earn money. Thirty to forty years ago everybody did lace. Even the kids were involved in the process. In the summer the children would make lace balls and then they would sell what they had made to earn extra money for pocket change. But 30 years ago factories came to Gozo and the younger and middle aged people went to work in the factories instead of doing lacework or other types of traditional crafts. The introduction of factories to the island first decreased the number of women learning how to weave lace, as it was no longer a main economic supporter, and secondly the factories, and later tourism, provided the people of Gozo with a high enough standard of living that they do not need to supplement their livelihood anymore by selling lace. These factors have caused a decline in the number of women weaving for commercial reasons. In turn this will most likely lead to the end of the sale of handmade lace to tourists in the near future. But this does not mean that the art of lace will die with the older generation of women. Lace will continue as a hobby and stress reliever for the younger women. They are simply less likely to sell their works to tourists as the monetary amount returned is not viewed by them as being equivalent to the amount of time put into making even a simple piece of lace, let alone an intricate one.

Lace is sure to be continued as there have been many programs, or steps, taken in the recent past to insure that the knowledge of how to do traditional Gozo bobbin lace does not die with the passing of the older women. Some of the steps being taken to ensure this continuation are the creation of schools and classes, as well as the publishing of step-by-step books on how to weave lace. There are free government classes being offered by the ministry, there are women who teach lace work in their homes in the evenings, so even women who are working can take the classes, and there is the Fine Arts School on Gozo. The Fine Arts School on Gozo, which is a satellite of the University of Malta, is the most popular and extensive program when it comes to teaching lace. The school has a total of 900 students, with 200-400 of these students studying lace. Besides lace the Fine Arts School teaches other handicrafts such as pottery, filigree, glass work, and other such crafts. The lace program is one of the largest programs as it offers day and night classes, while the other crafts are only taught during the day. By teaching lace in both the day and evening more people are able to attend classes. For instance housewives will attend the day classes while their children are at school and the evening classes are most likely to be attended by women who work during the day; as they would be unable to attend the classes until the evening. These classes are

not only being offered in order to teach those who do not know how to weave lace to do so, but also as a way to become more proficient in the art of making lace. Normally 90% of the students know how to make lace before attending the school, they simply go to learn certain stitches and finer lace styles.

Besides taking classes at the Fine Arts School, learning from the older women who are paid by the government to teach the younger women, or taking classes offered by the ministry, a person can also buy books that explain the process and provide designs, if they cannot attend classes. As stated previously one woman who has been very influential in the preservation of lacework is Consiglia Azzopardi. I first came upon her name when I was in Marsalforn looking at some postcards. On one there was a woman weaving lace in traditional clothing. When I looked on the back it said "Well known lace instructor and promoter Consiglia Azzopardi works at the Folklore Museum in Gharb". After this first encounter I kept coming upon her name while researching lacework. She has written several books that explain how to weave bobbin lace, as well as providing patterns for the weaving process. Two of these books which I reviewed are *Gozo Lace: A Selection of Bobbin Lace Patterns Designed by Dun Guzzepp Diacono (1847-1924)* and *Gozo Lace: An Introduction to Lace Making in the Maltese Islands*. Both of these books include short histories of bobbin lace in the Maltese Islands, as well as a list of the necessary equipment, materials, the basic stitches used, some designs, and how to finish a piece of lace. For those who can not attend classes these books are an excellent substitute, and even people who are not from Gozo can learn how to make their traditional bobbin lacework as all they have to do is study the process from Azzopardi's books.

As has been shown there are two areas of lacework under consideration when asking the question: Will handmade lacework on the Island of Gozo continue or disappear in the next few years? When it comes to handmade lace as related to tourists the answer is most likely yes, but as an overall art form I believe that it will be continued by later generations of women. As a means of economic support or help lace has already ceased to fulfill this function within Gozitan society. The introduction of factories and the industries related to tourism have raised the standard of living for the people living on Gozo, thereby negating the commercial functions that handmade lace once occupied in the Gozitan family. Also since the price at which lace is sold has not increased along with the cost of its material or in relation to the expectations of the people, there is no longer any great incentive for women to sell what they

make. Instead most, especially the younger women, keep what they make in their spare time or give their work away as gifts. Therefore it is erroneous to say that fewer women are learning how to make bobbin lace when in fact it is just that fewer people are selling what they make; because of this the sale of lacework is declining and not the art itself. Is it possible for the sale of handmade lacework to continue on Gozo?

The answer to this is unclear, but what is apparent is that in order for this to even have a chance of continuing some changes need to be made in the sale of these goods but without alienating the customers, as no one will buy an item that they believe is too expensive or if they are unsure of its authenticity.

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