

# Modern identities in a traditional society the effect of modern development on the traditional identity of a rural island

by *Laura Jarvis*

## A B S T R A C T

I examine the economic developments on the island of Gozo in connection with Malta's membership to the European Union. As an island that has been known for its fishing villages, hand made lace, and traditional Catholic values, the economic development and consequential influx of consumerism are changing the face of Gozo. I identify the different cultural identities that arise from new developments, higher standard of living, and increased consumer culture. Then, by analyzing the different generations on the island as well as personal ties to traditions such as siestas and opinions about the development on the island, I illustrate the generation gaps in acceptance of new identity, as well as the struggle to hold on to an older way of life.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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### ***Introduction: Traditions and the future of the island***

Travel and real estate websites such as Escape Artist describe the island of Gozo as "Green, fertile, and with plenty of open spaces... Perched atop undulating hills, tranquil villages remain wrapped in the cloak of yesteryear. There are windmills... prehistoric temples... farmers riding horse-drawn traps... turkeys getting fattened for Christmas on flat-roofed houses... Church clocks are set at different times to confuse the devil" (Harvey 2003)

This description is very much true. With a population of 30,000 and main industries of agriculture and tourism, the lifestyle of Gozo is more rural and less hurried than many of the other areas of Europe (Ministry of Gozo). The most popular jobs to hold are in crafts, retail, agriculture, or tourism.

Many people shop at vegetable stands and small market stores. They go to the butcher for their meat, the baker for their bread, and the small grocer for their nonperishable items and other necessities. Although they have public transportation, because of the small size of the island the schedule is approximated depending on how long it should take the bus to get somewhere. Some of the busses are very old, but they are a landmark of the island, and a tourist attraction.

Gozo is also a conservative culture. They have strong Roman Catholic ties, and even today each town of Gozo celebrates a festa, or feast in tribute to their patron saint. The devotion to religion on Gozo can be seen by the many statues of religious figures around towns, in squares and even hanging on people's doors or in niches of their houses.

In addition to the rural aspects of the island, the pace of life is also more leisurely. The custom in Gozo, even in the central city of Victoria, is to take siesta during the day. Originally it was a time to be inside and escape the sun in the hottest hours of the day. Recently, because of air conditioning, that is becoming less necessary. However the tradition of the siesta as a time to relax with family at home is still much engrained in the identities of the Gozitans. Also, apart from siesta, the older, retired people can often be seen sitting in cafes with friends having a cappuccino, or outside their homes running lace and hanging laundry.

On the other hand, there has been a modern movement in Gozo and more specifically the main city of Victoria toward a more urban life, with supermarkets and shopping centers. This shift is in large part related to the acceptance of Malta into the European Union in 2004. The EU has made arrangements to increase the revenue and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Gozo, because the island had less than 50% of the average GDP of the other countries in the Union when it was accepted. Through a currency change to the Euro as well as a push for less expensive travel to Malta from within the European Union, they worked to make Malta an easily accessible vacation spot for many Europeans. This in turn is broadening the horizons for the tourism industry of the country. As tourism is the most lucrative economic sector in Gozo, this is the easiest way to increase revenue for the island. To increase chances for growth, Gozo is also receiving monetary assistance from the EU to develop their domestic industry outside of tourism as well (Accession Treaty).

As the European Union and the country of Malta are working to increase the income of the country and those that live there, one must ask what consequences this will bring

to the people of Gozo. Malta already has one of the highest population densities in the world, due in part to the large amount of industrialization on such a small island. Gozo, however, has a population density that is 8 people per kilometer, instead of Malta's 1280 per kilometer (Visit Malta). If the government of Gozo allows increased industrialization, the results could be disastrous for the serenely rural island itself. In this study of cultural transformation and the ongoing battle between modernity and tradition, the aspects of Gozo's European emergence will be examined, as well as the local reaction and its significance for the future identity of the island and its residents.

### ***Research Methods***

To gain an understanding of the development on Gozo and the subsequent reactions, I conducted interviews with residents of Gozo. Those I interviewed were of all different ages and held various jobs on the island. To coordinate these interviews with current events on the island and gain a better understanding of the situation, I also did research within the local periodicals of Malta and Gozo. I also examined publications about the Maltese membership in the European Union, including any future plans for development and tourism on the island, as well as the reasons for doing so.

### ***Development of Malta and Gozo***

The country of Malta has recently been declared by Dow Jones a 'developed market' instead of an 'emerging market,' which shows the quick increase in industry dependability within the country since its induction into the EU in 2004 (Wilshire News). The increase in investment into Malta has increased the amount of jobs, which in turn is lowering the rate of unemployment. There were 476 less unemployed people this June than the same time last year (MaltaMedia News). However, most of the financial as well as manufacturing companies, and therefore the jobs that are connected with these developments occur on the main island. This is causing a gap in the age groups of Gozo, because Gozo loses a lot of the educated youths to better jobs on Malta. In the same article, it was shown that while the overall trend was lower, unemployment had gone up on the island of Gozo.

Gozo itself has also made expansions to increase the job market and revenue. They built the Arkadia mall, which was constructed in 2007 and employs many younger people of the island, as one can see by looking in the shops. Additionally, there is another shopping center being con-

structured in Victoria called Prime Mall, which has created construction jobs and, once finished will create 50-70 retail jobs and bring in more revenue for the island (Gozo News 2007). The government has also recently implemented grants and government aid for part-time artisans, disadvantaged workers (single mothers and people over 50), and new enterprises that open up jobs for Gozitans (specifically the youth sector). Also, the government of the island began a program in 2007 that works to transfer Gozitan workers back from Malta (Gawdex 2007/2).

To further help the modern development of the island, Gozo has provided ease of travel as well. The road project has been fully underway since at least the beginning of 2006, and as of now they are still working on many of these roads. The expansion project is also one that is being partially supported by the European Union, as modern roads will support the increase of travel to jobs and a large number of tourists coming and going (Gawdex 2006).

In addition to the expansions Gozo has already made, they have many plans for the future growth of the island. Some of these plans include constructing a working air strip, as well as obtaining space for cruise liner docking stations around the coastline. These will, in turn, create more opportunities for the tourism industry to expand, and more jobs to open up. However, these 'improvements,' specifically the cruise liner docks, can have many negative impacts on life in port towns, as well as on the wild-life that call the bay area their home (Gawdex 2006/2).

### ***Reactions to Development and Modern Identities***

When asked about the changes made on the island, Gozitans had many different opinions about the modern tourist destination that Gozo is becoming. John\*, a native Gozitan whose parents have lived just outside of Victoria for many years, said he had seen very little difference in his life since Gozo started to develop. On the subject of the new Euro currency, he simply said, "It's just different money in my pocket. It is more money. I used to carry around five Lira, and now I have to carry around twelve Euro" (Interview Aug 10, 2008).

He also commented that there is a lot of construction and development in and around Victoria, but the smaller towns are the same as they have always been. John claimed this to be because the smaller towns are self sufficient and make their own food, so they don't need to make as much money.

However, the government of Gozo expects this to change, because they will be developing more of the smaller towns, especially the ones near the sea, to accommodate the increasing tourism (Gozo.gov Jan 2008).

An older man named Paul\*, who I met while he was drinking cappuccino at a café in the morning, said that he has noticed a lot of changes since his earlier days in Gozo. "I miss seeing horses everywhere instead of all these cars. The new cars, they don't mean anything. They're just a way for the young people to show off their money and it makes me sad that they don't care about our history." As one of the older generation, Paul felt he needed to remember the past and celebrate it, because the younger generation is changing so quickly. Although, in many cultures it is much the same; the older generation is in charge of holding on to the past and the tradition. However, the past that Paul speaks of was not very long ago. There are even still some horse-draw carts that can be seen around the island. The transformation is not yet complete.

Also, Michael, the owner of a home goods store near Independence Square said that he had not noticed much of a difference in his life or his store since the Arkadia department store had been built. "Our prices are not as high as the big store's. It may be bigger and more efficient, but people still come here to buy what they need." He also laughingly explained that, in the case of the new currency, he was excited to have another old currency to add to his collection. He does, however, worry about the well being of his children, growing up in a new society where money and material goods become as important as beliefs and family (Interview, Aug 13).

As this man has demonstrated, it is important to understand how the changes in economics affect the lives and identity of the residents as well as the traditions and culture of the island society. His worries about his daughters are valid, because he knows that they will not have the same outlook on life that he did. This generational change is interesting when we consider the ongoing commercialism that has come to the island with such developments as these shopping centers. Therefore, if we first look at the positive and negative effects that this development will have on the society, we can examine how this may also change the outlooks of the individuals.

The first area that these new developments will affect is the job market on Gozo. The new developments will bring in more jobs and reduce the unemployment rate on the island. Since the largest amount of unemployment is in the youth

sector, more retail stores will bring in more employment for the younger people. Also, the incoming enterprises that are being assisted by the Gozitan government will bring jobs to those who are college educated who are being lost to occupations only available on Malta (Gawdex 2007/1).

This development, although good for the unemployment rate, could prove to be bad for population and space. Gozo is so perfect because it is not crowded like Malta, and there really isn't enough room for too many big businesses to come in. Right now there are some building and zoning codes to protect the scenic views and rural lifestyle of the island. In particular, these codes include a cap of three to four stories on buildings on the island as well as strict regulations against buying up essential agricultural fields outside of towns for expansion purposes (Harvey 2003).

However, these codes do not protect against everything. Qala has fought for years against building a large marina in their port, and many residents are against the airstrip that is going to bring in more tourism business because it will be built on agricultural land. These could have very long lasting, detrimental effects on the island's agriculture as well as the tourist industry (Barbara Bode 2007). The beauty of Gozo is what draws people there, and with an airstrip going up the middle of the island, some of that beauty may be lost.

On the other hand, there is a trend toward improving the agriculture of Gozo as well. With help from the European Union, farmers are receiving incentives to find ways to increase the quantity and quality of their produce. This is one of the most important programs, because increasing the agriculture will allow Gozo to keep the expansive fields that are essential to the landscape and rural feel of Gozo that it prizes (Gozo.gov Aug 2007). However, there are not that many jobs in agriculture, as most of the farms are family run. This is causing a conundrum, because they must increase the amount of jobs on Gozo without harming the agricultural land.

Agriculture isn't the only protected aspect of Gozitan culture. The European Union is also allocating money for historical preservation in many different places throughout the continent, including areas around the Mediterranean Sea. One of the premier projects preserving Gozitan culture is the TRIMED project, which was implemented to help protect and promote the cultural landscapes of the three most influential foods of the Mediterranean; bread, olive oil, and wine. TRIMED has set up exhibits all around the islands of the Mediterranean, including the windmill in Xaghra, Gozo that was used to grind wheat to make bread (TRIMED).

This project, along with many of the archeological projects that have been undertaken by the Ministry for Gozo to protect the many sites all over the island (such as the Ggantija stone temple) is very important to the preservation of Gozo's history and therefore it's culture.

The societal and economic effects of development, however, are not all that is important in the picture of Gozo. The study of the individual's assessment and adjustment in the face of change is essential to the comprehension of cultural change in the face of economic expansion. Also, how an individual see the changes before them, both in the entire nation and in the others he interacts with tells us about what beliefs and traditions remain and what has changed within each person. Individual perceptions about societal change can often tell us more than our observations of the changes themselves.

One of the many consequences of opening up new jobs through constructing malls has been the commercialism that has come to Gozo with it. Some days a girl walks half a mile extra to the next bus stop on her way home to Xaghra just to buy a fashion magazine, because she likes to keep up with current fashion. Also, there is now a BMW dealership at the Arkadia mall in Victoria. Many from the older generation think that these stores are silly, because no one in Gozo needs those kinds of cars. However, John said that he has noticed how people react to these status symbols, and how important they are to many of the men and women from his age group. Although John wants to be able to find a worthwhile job on Gozo so he can stay near his family and home instead of moving to Malta or out of the country, he realizes that the effects of development aren't all positive. He expresses that this material mentality is one of the downfalls that came with bringing new jobs and businesses into the cultural landscape of Gozo. "People aren't happy when someone they know succeeds anymore. They used to celebrate achievements, but now people are more and more likely to be jealous of success." He sees this as a shift toward the competition in commercialism of some other European countries. This may only be his opinion of the new identity on the island, but this is still worthwhile to examine (Interview Aug 12).

### ***Conserving Traditions***

People still manage to stay resilient when it comes to changes associated with this development. For instance, the new mall is open and air conditioned during siesta, so one might assume that teenagers would be hanging out there during their breaks, but there are very few. Even now,

siesta as family time is still a respected tradition. Marija\*, a sales girl in the jewelry store at the mall agreed that the mall gets very slow from 1:30-3:30.

So, although the time frame may be shrinking slowly (siesta is still considered to fall between 12:30 and 4pm), many of the locals still head home during this time. A taxi driver even said that he would never let his child go to the mall during siesta, because it is the family's time together.

Shunning the new air conditioned McCafe in the Arkadia mall is not the only way families obey the traditions of their homes. Some families actually take their siesta in the cool air conditioning of the mall. While the adults sip cappuccinos, the children play on the escalators or the video games. There are now a few families who regularly frequent McCafe during the break in the day. Even John occasionally takes his little cousin to the mall, and he has a snack and a cappuccino while his cousin plays with the video games. They have adapted their rituals and traditions to fit with the more modern way of life presented to them.

Although during siesta many Gozitans stay home rather than go shopping, at other times of the day many people—especially tourists and younger locals—can be seen shopping throughout the mall. Long-term tourists (mostly from Malta) are likely to shop for the things they need to stock new apartments at Arkadia, because it's easier. Marija also said that the younger generations, specifically those in their twenties and early thirties, are more inclined to shop at the department store and giant supermarket because they like the efficiency of it. She said that even if she didn't have the excuse of working at the mall, she would probably still do most of her grocery shopping at Arkadia because it's easy and it's one stop shopping. Her parents, on the other hand, still go to a separate bakery, butcher, and vegetable market to get their daily supplies (Interview Aug 15). Also, the owners of a vegetable stand in Independence Square said that although the new stores have everything in one place, that the smaller stores will never lose business, because they are cheaper and they have loyal customers. Additionally, many tourists like to buy snacks at the quaint stands because it fits with the ideal view of Gozo (Interview Aug 13).

Even when in everyday life individuals are accepting or adapting to the new modern ways, many are also working to protect the history and culture of Gozo. The family that runs Ta'Furnar, the only stone oven bakery left on the Maltese islands works to keep the tradition of stone oven baked ftira going into the future. Although the family has

recently turned the bakery into a full restaurant, tourists and magazines come to see the traditional Maltese cooking in the stone oven, and locals still come by to grab ftira or bake their holiday pies (Interview, Aug 11). Finally, in the world of the European Union, Gozo's metamorphosis to a developed and modern area is inevitable for two reasons. The first is that as long as the EU is giving money to Gozo (which will only end when their Gross Domestic Product is sufficient enough), they will have to develop. It is one of the reasons Malta joined the EU in the first place. Additionally, if Gozo does not offer more educated careers, the island will lose many of its younger residents, leaving the elderly with no one to rely on. Therefore, the only resolution is to hold on to as much as they can while keeping a keen eye and a restricting hand on the expansive structures of the emerging state as well as the progressive mentalities of the young.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, when examining the inevitable changes to many of the features of Gozo, it is interesting to consider the differences between the generations. Throughout my experiences with the people of the island, as with people from many places, it seems the older generation tries to protect themselves and their culture from change while the younger generation tries—and often wants—to adapt and change with it. Many of the older people negatively judge the newer ideals and reminisce about better days of horse drawn plows, as they become the pillars of tradition in the changing world. Their identities are stamped by the history of the island. All the while, the identity of the younger generation is developed in the evolution of the culture. Instead of looking for comfort in the past, they look for survival in the future. Inevitably, the younger generations are the ones that will inherit the island, and it will become their responsibility to hold up the traditions of the generations before them as best they can while the generations after them look further into the future.

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