

# “Lace as the Bread of the People”: Gender and Power through Craft Revitalization in Malta and Gozo

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## S U M M A R Y

This article examines the multidimensional nature of the Maltese identity through life trajectories surrounding the traditional art form of lace making on Malta and Gozo. It is based on four weeks of field work in Gozo, Malta in June of 2015 with Expedition's Off The Beaten Track summer field-school. This research is shaped by questions of heritage, gender power, and female agency, looking into issues such as how traditional lacemaking culture reflects Maltese identity, the space lacemaking women took in traditional economy and what this space has become today, how the craft has been revitalized and reclaimed, and what major forces are part of modern reclamation of the craft. The rich history of Malta's lacemaking tradition is used as the guiding force in unraveling the tradition's and the lace workers' storylines, intertwining traditional heritage with the present to examine the space it holds as well as coming to understand the space women have taken in Maltese society across time. This article takes from a variety of disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, heritage studies, gender theory, and women's studies, to examine the tradition's place in the urbanizing world of Malta's archipelago and what this means for the crafters.

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

### Keywords

*Lace culture, heritage, gender power structures, female agency, market, economy, Koperattiva, Malta*

### How to refer to this article

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## Introduction

Maltese and Gozitan lace was once introduced to the islands by a group of priests intending it to create a space for female economic power. This introduction of the lace industry is one which created an incredible sense of identity and community by the women who worked it. However, while this was the original spark for female agency on the islands, the craft truly was one which catered female agency to the benefit of male agency.

Recently, however, the market has seen a change with the onset of urbanization, and this has caused for a displacement of older female workers and the craft has stopped being passed down within families as it once had. This market change has lessened the lace industry's claim over the economy, but many women still hold onto it as it had once defined them as a community. Due to all of this, lace culture has ceased to be monitored by the men who originally created it.

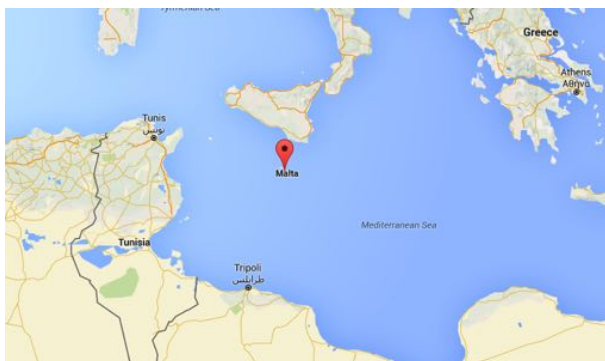


Figure 1: Map of the Mediterranean (Google Maps)



Figure 2: Map of Malta (Google Maps)

This lull in market activity has allowed for a revitalization and rebirth of the craft as one which can be reclaimed by the women workers, which is exactly what Consiglia Az-zopardi has done in her movement with a group she has called the Koperattiva, and this movement will be used to address this reclaim over the heritage market which is now seen in Gozo. This lace revitalization movement is once which goes beyond the rebirth of a heritage – it is one which is utilizing the heritage market to not simply include, but actively enable the women lace workers in Gozo to create new space for their own female agency and empowerment within contemporary Malta, as shown through personal accounts and the work of Consiglia Az-zopardi.

## Methodology

### The Field

The Maltese Archipelago is located in the Mediterranean Sea, approximately a three-hour ferry ride from South from Sicily and near Tunisia, Libya, and Greece in other directions (see Figure 1). Malta consists of three inhabited islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino (see Figure 2), with Malta being the most populated, industrialized, and urbanized of the three islands. I spent my last week on mainland Malta, staying in Qormi with fellow researchers, and was able to learn many of the nuanced differences in culture between the islands and the people. Northwest of Malta lies Comino, a very small island populated only by one family and a hotel – virtually only visited as a tourist destination to spend time in Malta's beautiful waters. Farther Northwest of Malta and Comino lies Gozo, known to locals as Ghawdex; it is the more traditional, less populated, more agricultural of the islands, and is where I spent the majority of my time in the archipelago, living for three weeks' time in Xlendi Bay.

Throughout its years of inhabitation, Malta has passed through many different hands of rule, from Middle Eastern to French to most notably being owned by the British in 1814, experiencing both world wars, finding independence in 1964, declaring itself a republic a decade later, and joining the European Union in 2004 (CIA World Factbook). During the time of British rule, Malta began making a name for itself in international trade, and adopting crafts from those who came into contact with the country and finding distinctly Maltese and Gozitan ways to express their culture. This started with the Order of St. John's introduction of traditional lace. These and

other traditional crafts have woven in and out of societal relevance, but lace has followed Maltese history since the 1600s. Lacemaking is unique in Maltese artisan culture in that it has survived changes in governmental structure, industrialization, and tourist culture – though each entity has left a mark on the tradition in some way, shape, or form, these changes are slight and the art has continued to thrive.

I conducted my fieldwork in the streets of Malta and Gozo – in tourists' shops, in family homes, in chairs placed on street walkways, in the traditional artisan community at Gharb, and at the Ixtabi lace house running the revival movement of Maltese and Gozitan lace. Traditional lace has become less prominent than it once was in Maltese society, even in traditional Gozo, in recent decades following the industrialization of the mainland. Lace as identity, however, is still important to many, and this traditional identity is now being commodified for the tourists' sake. Here, it is possible to see traditional Malta still existing.

### Methods

My research took place within the sea-bound island of Gozo, with my base in Xlendi Bay. Small a community as it is though, I found connections all across the island and made my way through the web of individuals still practicing the art and keeping the traditional identity of Malta and Gozo alive in the process. I did my fieldwork over a four-week period in June 2015, three of which spent in Gozo and the final week in Malta. I lived in the village of Xlendi, Gozo, alongside peers in anthropology at Expedition's Off the Beaten Track base, providing me an unstructured but supportive environment from which to do my research.

Fieldwork consisted mostly of finding connections in the streets and in shops, talking with various individuals who somehow all knew each other, and sharing in a common passion for art. I held countless informal conversations with locals at shops, on the busses, walking throughout town, and along the bays with which I formed my research questions and learned more deeply about the subjects I would be researching. In addition to these, I held more formal, scheduled interviews and participant-observation with my many informants. Stories surrounding lacemaking were abundant. I spent hours speaking with individuals on streets and sidewalks with lacemakers,



Figure 3 & 4: Lacemaking in action with Antoinette in Victoria (photos by author).

visited local shops selling lace, and spent time at the Ixtabi Lace House as well as the traditional crafters' village in Gharb, speaking to residents and those who grew up with the culture to learn about lacemaking's effects on Maltese culture. Names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity, with the exception of Consiglia Azzopardi as this is her life's work.

### *A History of the Craft*

Traditional lace has been weaving its way out of society as of recent years. During the time of British rule, Malta began making a name for herself in international trade, and adopting crafts from those they came into contact with and finding distinctly Maltese and Gozitan ways to express their culture, starting with the Order of St. John's introduction of traditional lace. These and other traditional crafts have woven in and out of societal relevance, but lace has followed Maltese history since the 1600s. Lacemaking is unique in Maltese artisan culture in that it has survived changes in governmental structure, colonization, wars, political movements, globalization, industrialization, and tourist culture – though each entity has left a mark on the tradition in some way, shape, or form, these changes are slight and the art has continued to thrive just as traditional Malta and Maltese identity has through today. Lace as identity, however, is still important to many Maltese, and this traditional country identity is now being revitalized for the workers' sake. Here, it is possible to see traditional Malta still existing (Azzopardi 1991).

Local tradition has it that pillow lace first appeared in Genoa in 1530, spreading throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. In Malta and Gozo, it appeared in the 16th century, and remained strong until the 18th century when the French occupation disturbed the economy and caused for a great depression. While the tradition was already well established in the eighteenth century, the depression during the first thirty years of the 19th century caused for an almost complete extinction of the industry, until Dun Curmi (Dun translating to "priest") brought a narrow piece from Genoa, reintroducing the tradition to the islands (Azzopardi 1991).

This led to Dun Ġużepp's involvement with the Casa Industriale in 1879, organizing the craft to increase income and educate girls, giving the Gozitan woman a way to raise not only her own standard of living, but that of her family as well. Maltese and Gozitan lacemaking began

with the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with the help of Dun Ġużepp Diacono. Dun Ġużepp began this tradition within his congregation to allow women to earn a decent living from their homes, and he became a pioneer for lacemaking in Malta and Gozo. On the other hand, this also reinforced patriarchal notions concerning women working in the so-called "man's" world through female workspace being pioneered by men. Since traditionally the workforce was filled by men, women were unable to enter and there was no space for female economic independence. With the introduction of the craft, however, space was created for women to take jobs on and earn income in a "respectable" fashion, though in reality the craft was still dictated and regulated by the men of society. While it can be seen as a way to create economic responsibility for women, it can also be seen as a way to keep women in their own sphere, protecting the larger male economy and job force. Nevertheless, this work instilled a charisma and spiritual insight within its workers, giving Gozitan women dignity through work and creating the Casa Industriale beginning in Gozo, to be spread to Malta (Azzopardi 1991).

Diacono was very close to poverty and illiteracy among Gozitans in his work, and he began to promote lacemaking to keep young girls occupied and help to improve the low income faced by their families. The Casa Industriale was born out of this time as a school where girls from the villages could attend to learn and be educated in the arts of lacemaking, and also provided the shop to sell the works to locals, tourists, and to be exported to Europe (Azzopardi 1991).

By the 19th century, the craft was rebirthed with ties to British rule and the new contacts the Maltese were forging. Maltese lace was born again, changing the original style to suit the island's unique style, adding coarser thread, the eight-pointed cross of St. John, and other motifs to distinguish itself. Necessary materials include a lace pillow (trajbu), linen or cotton thread, bobbins (chombini), pins, a pin cushion, a pricking tool, scissors, and a cloth to keep the work clean. To prepare the pattern, one must cover the pattern in clear film and attach it to the pillow, wind the chombini, and then go about the work (see Figures 3 and 4).

Lace became a household staple and provided educational opportunity for women and young girls, though still under the direction of men. Dun Ġużepp Diacono then began the promotion of lace in Gozo, keeping with the





Figure 5: Motifs. Maltese cross (upper left), il-Festun tal-Warda (upper right), leaves (lower left), daisy and leaves (lower right), (Azzopardi 1998).

theme of male agency in a female craft, as the parish priest of Qala and Xaghra. Diacono brought a great deal of new patterns which would be worked by the women workers and bring in revenue, as well as distinguish Maltese lace further, such as the innovation of the black shawl. This industry grew on a family basis, with female family units producing items for family revenue. In the 1850s-60s, Maltese lace became a fad and their signature geometric style was copied throughout Europe with the help of international craft fairs, such as the British Empire Exhibition in England, and became popular with British royalty.

Motifs are what truly define Maltese and Gozitan lace from the rest of the globe's traditional lace styles. First is the Salib tal-Kavallieri (eight-pointed cross), which derives from the times of the Knights of Saint of John, and is a representation of the Maltese identity within the work. Most patterns are built around the Maltese cross, or at least include it somewhere within the work. The next motif is the il-Festun ta'l-Istilla (star), which is based upon the mosaic patterns found in traditional Maltese homes, deriving from the Arab rule in Malta. Another main motif is the il-Festun tal-Warda (flower) motif, also known as the daisy, the symbol of Gozo. These motifs are part of what set Maltese lace apart from other lacemaking traditions, and contribute to interweaving a Maltese identity into the work, keeping traditionality alive through today. Dun Ġużepp's work began with creating new patterns to sell for profit, which led to distinguishing Gozo lace from the mainland's with new motifs, colors, and materials. Motifs included nationalistic themes, such as the xemx (sun), Maltese cross, leaves, and daisies (see Figure 5).

Dun Ġużepp promoted the industry through a five-step plan: establishing lessons and organizing workers, commercializing and redefining patterns, creating Gozo Lace fairs in Malta and London, organizing sale via shops, and writing a publication. This is where the beginning of industry reclaim by women can be found – here is where women began running more aspects of the economic trade and development. The industry took off and girls were taught by original women in Rabat from the Casa Industriale, creating more space for learning and selling, eventually leading to the Società della Casa Industriale which was fully run by and for women. This early industry employed and empowered over 6800 women, earning nine pence to one shilling per day, which was quite a high wage for the time (Azzopardi 1998).

Lacemaking was a great contribution to Maltese economy, bringing in £50,000 annually. Lace became integral to society, forming bonds with royalty, economic exchange, dowry articles, and other entities. In the 1960s, Gozitans began to emigrate from their homeland to find work elsewhere, carrying the tradition globally. Now, old patterns have been recovered and the lace is cherished in its current revival, led by Consiglia Azzopardi. In this movement, she hopes to revive the craft for the sake of the Maltese identity and the community it represents, teaching courses at the Gozo University campus and creating a group of women making lace together daily, innovate designs, and work to create the demand for lace once more (Azzopardi 1991).

### ***Changing Dynamics with the Kopparativa in Gender and Identity***

Stories surrounding lacemaking and lace as a cultural entity are abundant – in interviews I conducted during fieldwork, I was lucky enough to find stories both in the macro- and microscales. I had informants who would tell me the full history of lacemaking just off the top of their heads, all agreeing as taught by the same historical view in primary schooling, and others who would give me personal accounts of family tradition dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Never once did I have a day where I did not see someone on the street weaving lace in front of their homes or in their shops, and never once did these people lack a story to share with me. I sat with lacemakers in the street and in shops and could talk to them for hours, and I spent a good portion of my time speaking with people both in the traditional crafters village and the Ixtabi lace house in Gharb.

Much of what I have learned about lace identity was from the Gozitan locals, whether they were owners of shops or merely sitting outside their homes with the trajbu in their lap weaving lace. I sat with these women for hours discussing their lives of lacemaking and learning their family traditions, learning their life stories in the process. To all the women and families who weave, it is truly their identity within their Maltese heritage – it is how they grew up, made money, bonded with their families, passed it onto their children, and so on. With the beginnings of the craft as a means of economic ability for women, much can be said of the craft as feminine identity and history working to better a national heritage.



Figure 6: Ixtabi Lace House, Għarb (photo by author)

Identity formation is seen in the Gozitans' keeping of lace culture as heritage in traditional crafters' villages, side street shops, families, and in particular the Ixtabi Lace House run by Dr. Consiglia Azzopardi in Għarb, who has devoted her life to the revitalization movement of Maltese and Gozitan lacemaking (see Figure 6). Consiglia earned her Ph.D. through the comprehensive research of the history of lacemaking, teaches this history at their University, created the Koperattiva as a team to keep lace culture alive, and devoted part of her childhood home as a collective display for the lace and a work zone for the Koperattiva.

Similarly, Mary owns a lace and craft shop attached to her home in Victoria – the visitor rings her doorbell and talks to her to visit the shop. She comes downstairs and lets the visitor into the main floor of her home which acts as her laceshop which is filled with old lace relics passed down for four generations in her family. Here, she taught me about her family's lace tradition, showed me pieces made by her grandmother and great grandmother, and taught me the basics of weaving the lace. This shop is more than just a shop – it acts as a gallery of family, identity, femininity, heritage, and history for the visitor. Here, the visitor is more than just a shopping tourist – Mary teaches her visitors her family history, her craft, her life, and her passions in Maltese tradition and identity.

Consiglia self-advocates that she does not work for tourism in lace culture as other lacemakers I met did. Her motivations are more aimed toward the future of this sector of culture through national heritage identity rather than the local profit as the tourism workers were aiming toward – she works to keep the craft alive and well for the sake of the craft and the identity, cultivating space for its growth and development. Her Koperattiva works on projects requested by their patrons, competing with industrialized economy to keep the handicraft alive,

*What we think with our Koperattiva is, we do not get involved into these little bookmarks and whatever, but if we get a project like that which kept us busy for two years, it would be a good project, you know? We are happy with that, because we are specializing, we are getting to evolve into above the measuring thing, because there is a lot of competition from machine... There is very little handmade out... but there are people who say like "I would like to have a christening gown" and you order it from the person that works or from Koperattiva and organize it for her. Especially we have the biggest market for the priests when they want their dresses, you know. They come, they want their pattern – we do not make the same pattern for*

*everyone, we do not make the same pattern twice. Because if you can do a pattern, why do you use the same pattern? And if it is done for you, you would like to have those symbols and your own tastes, as somebody else has their own tastes. So we also take that into consideration (Consiglia interview).*

Their work is for the tradition, the livelihood that the craft once represented. Consiglia advocates for the tradition of the craft but also works toward the upkeep through individualization – each patron she services has the opportunity to take part in the design, and this is where her goals in the Ixtabi lace house differ from those working within shops aimed at tourism: Consiglia advocates for lace culture's future rather than merely the upkeep of what has been for centuries. Her vision holds that in order for that future to have a hope reviving the craft, innovation is key. In this, she finds ways to intrigue the public, whether by restoring old family emblems or creating designs unique to the individual patron and working to innovate the staple patterns that have been established for centuries.

As Consiglia told me, there was a time when "lace was the bread of the people", but now it is impossible to make a living by weaving lace. Malta has been urbanizing since its involvement with British rule, and modernizing with their entry to the European Union in the most recent decades, and this has had a profound effect on Maltese and Gozitan economic prospects. Employment has changed greatly, ranging from colonization and lack of natural resources in a neo-liberal world, giving people appreciation for long-term job security, self-reliance, good conditions, and industrialization that might not be found elsewhere. Malta's entry to the EU reflects their ever-increasing sense of globalization, and has translated into a desire to be more economically viable, and GDP has increased tenfold since 1970 (Trading Economics). Employment often goes overseas, beginning with the Fordist era during which so many immigrants found themselves immigrating to the USA due to their seeking of employment with Ford Motor Company, with main emphasis on a trade union. This change in economic field has caused for a great upheaval in employment on the islands, causing for a great sense of globalization with native Maltese leaving the islands for employment prospects elsewhere (Cassar and Briner 2009).

This shift in economy within Gozitan culture has changed the landscape of tradition in its process, thus affecting the ability to continue upkeep of traditional artisan culture

and the continuation of heritage as a career as it once had been built as. Heritage as part of the Maltese career sector can be seen in Consiglia's use of the Ixtabi Lace House, continuing the craft for patrons as it once had been, as well as within the tourist shops, selling lace as a way to educate tourists about Maltese heritage. One local I spoke to called lace a dying art, kept up only for the sentimentality of their culture as it once was, one even giving the craft less than a decade to exist before completely dying out, though it should be noted that this quote comes from my only male informant (Joseph interview). Joseph, a painter running a shop in Ixtabi with his lacemaking mother, says that the sentimentality of this part of culture is not enough to continue its upkeep, though when Consiglia was asked the same question, she was adamant about its ability to continue.

It is interesting to note the use of sentimentality in his argument, which truly seems to represent the male perspective of this craft: nostalgic memory (Howard 2003) has kept the craft alive thus far, and while it seems to have phased out of overall importance within high heritage on the national level, its sentimentality and overall utility still thrives within low heritage on the individual and local level, though may not be able to continue it (Schofield 2001). His comments are from the male perspective; a perspective which may have introduced the craft and played a role in the upkeep of it for quite a time, but now that it is wholly in the hands of the women and men are not generally involved in lace culture, it seems the male perspective has changed to be more cynical of the culture's market. Nevertheless, the artisan community has been struggling to keep its footing and relevance with the switch to a more urbanized market. The desires of the market seem to have changed with the introduction of consumerism, and with a lack of emphasis on traditionality these artisans are having to find new employment, or are unemployed because their skillset does not match the needs of the market surrounding them.

This difficulty in the decline of the craft, however, is being combated by Consiglia Azzopardi and her Kopperativa. She is reclaiming the craft in a way in which nobody has done before – by reclaiming the space that the craft used to exist in, rallying support from the members of her group as well as her students at University and from primary/secondary schooling before, she is taking the space that the lace craft existed in before and redefining it as a space for female empowerment. These women are pioneering the craft as the men once did, and in keeping with

the primarily female-oriented craft, they are reclaiming it for themselves, empowering women in business in all aspects as opposed to merely being empowered in the handiwork of it with men at the top. These women are reclaiming the industry as their own and in turn, are reclaiming their economic power in the process. In doing so, they are paving the way for a space which further respects and empowers female workers.

Lace began as a respectable career for women in a traditionally male-centered workforce, and brought gender dynamics to the economic field while it forged for itself a sector of Maltese culture. Women were able to create their own economy, though under the direction of the men upkeeping the field through overseeing the schools and exporting the lacework to mainland Malta and outside the country, still being the face of the art shows and international affairs. This was the only education many women were able to attain in their early years, thus leading to the only career they would be able to have later on. However, with the introduction of urbanism to the islands, the economy has completely switched. Where this was once a viable, respectable form of income in childhood, now in adulthood is impossible to even make half of a living off of the craft that was specifically introduced for women, tailored to Maltese culture, and created for women to raise to equality with men, though looking at it from a different perspective it was never truly equal. This urban economy has created a detrimental situation for women, as their livelihood is no longer able to support them. While this is not an irrevocable situation for young women, it is devastating for older women who have created their lives around a craft that is becoming obsolete. Their skillsets do not allow for them to seek out other employment, and the employment they currently have is not enough (Fisher 2004).

One morning, my colleagues informed me of a very passionate lacemaker in the heart of Victoria who sat in front of her home each morning and early afternoon weaving and teaching others about her art. I set out to find her the next morning, with only the knowledge that she lived in side streets of Victoria, the heart of Gozo. In the process, I became lost in the labyrinthine streets, but eventually turned the right corner and found a kind woman called Theresa, or rather she found me. I heard her call me from down the street, telling me to come look at her lace and take a picture or "movie" of her. I stayed with Theresa for a few hours, talking with her and her daughter Tanya and watching her interact with other tourists. She was very



open to photographs and sharing the tradition – in fact, she absolutely encouraged it – and when she told me to take a video, I of course obliged and started filming her making lace.

Theresa was my first informant on the subject, and from her I found not only information about lacemaking itself, but also about the way locals and tourists interact with this Maltese heritage. She gave me a lesson in lacemaking, telling me that after one day, I would learn it and it would be second nature to me very quickly. She told me about her family's lace traditions, and how she has been working the lace for 72 years, adding in that her chombini are over 300 years old and have been passed down in her family since her great grandmother used them in the 18th century. Whenever someone passed by, she would hold a conversation with them and try to introduce them to her lace, always asking them to come and see her art, take a picture, and purchase a bit of Gozitan culture to take home, always advertising the work as something authentic that they will never find anywhere else (see Figure 7) (Theresa interview).

With the introduction of industrialization, cost of living rose and demand for handmade products plummeted, leaving artisans out in the cold, abandoning crafts in search for stable economy. This changed the nature of Maltese streets – now, they are used for cars and busses, while they used to be for pedestrians, crafters, and sales. One of the lacemakers I spent time with explained to me how this has changed her ability to do her craft effectively, telling me, “I start 11, until 5 o'clock. But now I could not keep doing. At 3 o'clock I move...Normally I go in because I couldn't sit there. I could not sit there” (Theresa interview). Her business is run out of the patio area in front of her home, and she relies on the passerby of the tourists to keep selling and advertising. With change in city structure on the islands, the nature of their businesses change; consequentially, this means that with increase in automotive traffic (with an increase of 64,000 individuals owning vehicles in the past decade (Zammit 2015)) and subsequent decrease of foot traffic, she has a hard time keeping up with the pace of the economy and cannot sit outside her home to run her business. This struggle is what drives Consiglia Azzopardi's Koperattiva movement. Theresa exemplifies the beginnings of the craft's industry being left out of the main market, and with this change in market focus she shows the issues of older lace workers as being pushed to the margins of the economy. This struggle is what drives the Koperattiva, and this is

what Consiglia is combating while she reclaims the market for these women.

Being unable to create and sell on the streets has created for a disconnect in the community of lacemakers and the passing on of the heritage. It is this which has driven the Koperattiva movement, recreating the community from the industry, and creating space once more for the heritage to exist in their ever-changing world.

### ***Recreating Heritage for Female Agency***

It is interesting to note the ever-presence of Gozitan lace in windows and doors of everything from shops, to homes, and parishes. However, this lace is often old, putting less demand on the lace in modern times. The changing nature of lace culture as a sector of society has followed the ebbs and flows of the economy of the archipelago, moving from high demand both locally and internationally in the times of British colonization to an economy sustained by the demand of international tourism commodifying this piece of Maltese heritage (Martin 2010).

The craft has not yet become obsolete, however, and those who still weave and supplement their living with the heritage credit the inherent identity that lace culture still represents to Maltese and Gozitan culture, with or without globalism's effects,

*It is part of the culture. Because it's still in the blood, you know. Like they make pastizzi or like they make the bread. It's still here, in here [gestures to heart]. I mean, go to Australia, they make the pastizzi the Maltese way, they make the bread the Maltese way, they make the pasta the Maltese way, and they make money out of it. So it has remained part of the culture. But we, kiffina bonedu, (loosely translated to “how it stayed in a good one/how it stayed in our hearts”), but we just discarded it. We just discarded it. You know? And we try to find jobs in computer and things like that, you know? We did not exploit the possibilities for having this today because so much foreign influence coming in today, you know... But you keep it for its worth. (Consiglia interview)*

Consiglia keeps the Koperattiva for this matter just as the traditional crafters' village in Gharb is kept alive.

As others in Maltese studies have found, some traditions are kept despite the challenges, and many stay resilient to the change that they face, keeping tradition and keeping faith in the lifestyles they once lived (Jarvis 2008). The



Figure 7: Antoinette's shop outside her home in Victoria (photo by author).



Figure 8: SuperCrafts Shop, Francis's 16th Century Collection (photo by author).

traditions are kept for social heritage and social relevance, and while they may not fit in with the way the rest of the country is moving, the traditions and heritage are kept alive for the societal understanding and heritage it holds. The industry has ceased to merely be an industry: it is a community first and foremost, with its members supporting each other and continuing to foster the heritage and identity they have come to share. Consiglia is using the Koperattiva to recreate the community of lace workers, who in turn support and empower each other in this new economy. As this industry has since ceased to be controlled and monitored by the original men, these women of all ages are reclaiming their heritage for their own, and are thus able to use it for their own current and future empowerment. This shows the craft's cease as a major industry to be liberating – as the male frontrunners to the craft relinquished their control over the industry long ago, the space the craft exists in today is no longer monitored by the male agency which once held it. This left a free space for the women workers to reclaim it, as Consiglia has done, and now they are able to foster an environment which is free from male control and reclaim it as a space for a community of female empowerment.

For Gozitans, the craft is more than just a craft – it is an identity, and it is seen as innate, as discussed by a majority of informants. Locals tell stories of learning as children, and others tell stories of just knowing as they began, “I give them the bobbins and they know it already! It’s in them, it’s amazing, I don’t know how they experience this... They enjoy the clicking, you know, the clicking of the bobbins... You cannot find an expression, a relevant expression in English for it.” (Consiglia interview)

Just as this piece of heritage is a tradition, it also represents a lifestyle, and it defines the atmosphere most Gozitans grew up in. However, in the changing field that is Gozo, it is difficult for any item remaining static to sustain itself. Heritage, especially as seen in lace culture of Gozo, has been a way to bring the past to the present, to create a shared identity, and to choose what is important to your group’s story. While many today disregard the history within lace culture, others still consider it an intrinsic detail to the Maltese identity shared by all those on and from the islands, and it is this which is keeping the lace market alive in Gozo.

The upkeep of heritage in lace culture and the choosing of what to carry along both at the individual and national levels are a large part in identity formation, as this is

largely what is put on display and passed down along generations. Heritage and identity are tied together in that they are driven by nostalgic memory, passed down, chosen, fostered, and protected; one can choose what to keep as identity and many take part in a national identity. It is used as a form of group pride and identity, and members of society will choose to be involved in a field of heritage management, protecting and creating space for the heritage they themselves hold as identity and pass on to future generations. This is very relevant to lacemaking on Gozo – without the devoted community, the heritage would have fallen out of culture; it is exhibits such as Mary’s in Victoria and Consiglia’s at the Ixtabi Lace House that act as heritage management and create spaces for others to learn and care for the practice.

Mary, owner of the lace and craft shop in Victoria, has her shop attached to her home as well, and doubles as a display for her family’s work in lacemaking. Mary herself is a descendant of a family of lacemakers, with tradition dating back to the 16th century (see Figure 8), and has been keeping the tradition herself since she was four years old, 68 years’ experience total. The walls of her shop were lined with display cases holding lacework hundreds of years old, representing her family history within her shop. The space itself is her workroom, with the rest of her home just up the stairs, and feels more like a home than a place of retail, blurring the lines between home and workplace. Mary welcomed me to her shop the same way one welcomes another to their home, and when we sat down to talk it felt as if we were chatting in her living room. She is part of a longstanding tradition, and passes her craft down to relatives and the knowledge to tourists and all those interested in this piece of Maltese heritage. She grew up “hearing the music of the clinking bobbins”, which instilled a passion within her to continue the tradition throughout her life as a career, in teaching, and in her own therapy after an injury (Mary interview).

Identity interpretation is key in the sharing of a heritage, many choosing some parts over another to keep for themselves and their families, what to discard as irrelevant to their own identity formation, what to pass down to their children, and how to manage what they have chosen to keep – just as their ancestors learned before them, the women of Gozo still pass down the identity through their heritage and keep the space open for the craft and individuals to follow them (Howard 2003).





Figure 9: Farm to Fork festival dancers performing in traditional attire, designed with Maltese lace (photo by author).

The traditions of lace culture and the community created within it still bind Maltese and Gozitans together today, and many still consider it an intrinsic part of their heritage and identity as Maltese people. Tradition and culture are linked entities that are changing with the landscape of Malta and the globalizing culture the country has been facing. Lace culture is not what it once was; the community is smaller and the industry has dwindled out of the main market. The heritage has been kept not only for those still practicing, but also to keep traditional Malta relevant on the tourist map – tourism has kept the industry alive through today, and though it is impossible to make a living solely off of this market which was created to sustain, it has sustained passion from Maltese residents. This sustained passion allows for villages of traditional crafts, as well as traditional dance festivals such as the one I attended at Farm to Fork (see Figure 9) where performances by Gozitans in traditional-wear dominate the scene. This event in itself embodies the image of Maltese tradition in a contemporary world, and embodies the space that these traditions are still creating and upholding within popular society. With the sustained passion, the reclaim of the industry is one done in power, and thus the craft has begun its rebirth as a space which now has the opportunity to be an empowering space, creating the community of workers it once had. This community is one run by the workers and for the workers, and in this, the women are able to both empower and enable each other as members of the larger economy as the industry begins to rise once more.

Consiglia teaches university courses on the history and practice of lace as well as courses on designing and carrying out innovated patterns, passing down the tradition to those who may have veered away from it throughout their lives. She feels the importance of keeping this heritage alive and well and caters to each patron's project with care and the goal of continuing a tradition which has since slowed, because "It is a Maltese identity, because what you have seen of the laces, you know automatically it is a Maltese lace... you have to bring it back to the people who work the lace, also the teamwork and the socialization of it, before they work together in the street". Consiglia shows that the craft is a lifestyle just as much as it is an identity, and brings the community together in a shared identity. Here, with Consiglia and the Koperattiva, the women are not only included – this rebirthed field goes far beyond inclusivity to in that it actively enables the women to create a space for their own agency and empowerment, using lace as a gateway to empower their

community for themselves, their ancestors, and for the future of the industry.

Though lace culture has dwindled from the spotlight in Gozo and Malta, business groups such as the Koperattiva and individual sellers are still able to exist through the space that the rest of Malta and Gozo have created for them – the space of tourism, as well as the space of heritage marketing still allows old Malta to shine through the new. It is impossible to walk down the streets lined with limestone architecture and not see traditional Malta shining through the industrializing world. The space of heritage is still able to exist through tourism's sustainment, but is truly still for the people of Malta, both in physical spaces such as the Koperattiva and the traditional crafters' village in Gharb, but also in the metaphorical spaces of the community members still practicing and finding time within their own households to carry the torch of the continuous Maltese identity.

## Conclusion

In choosing the parts of their cultural heritage to keep alongside their country's progress, the country is in turn forming what is becoming a protected space for a continuous heritage, held by those who still advocate for its renewal, and keeping it alive as it continues to evolve in their changing world. This space keeps old Malta relevant to the new, providing a shared identity showing where the country has been and where they are capable of going with the passion they still have within them for their country. These nostalgic narratives have kept Maltese tradition alive in contemporary society; chosen heritage keeps these nostalgic narratives moving forward, showing Malta's rise to a more diverse nation in people and lifestyle – no longer strictly dichotomous in old versus new, but intersectional in the continuum of identities and lifestyles fostered by contemporary Maltese society. This community now has new beginnings in female agency, and with the space being sustained by the women, they are creating a new heritage economy for themselves and for the overall female agency of the artisan community, and thus are now actively sustaining a community of gender empowerment for their futures.

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