

# The Cultural Impact of Economic Conditions in Gozo

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This paper attempts to show that economic realities have a major influence on the culture of a society, and this hypothesis is discussed with reference to the island of Gozo, which is the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, with a population of just under 30,000 and the land area of about 65 km<sup>2</sup>.

The word culture is often associated with artistic behaviour and scholarly achievements (as in the German tradition), but the definition used in this paper is wider and covers various aspects of human activity such as language, customs, norms, values and beliefs.

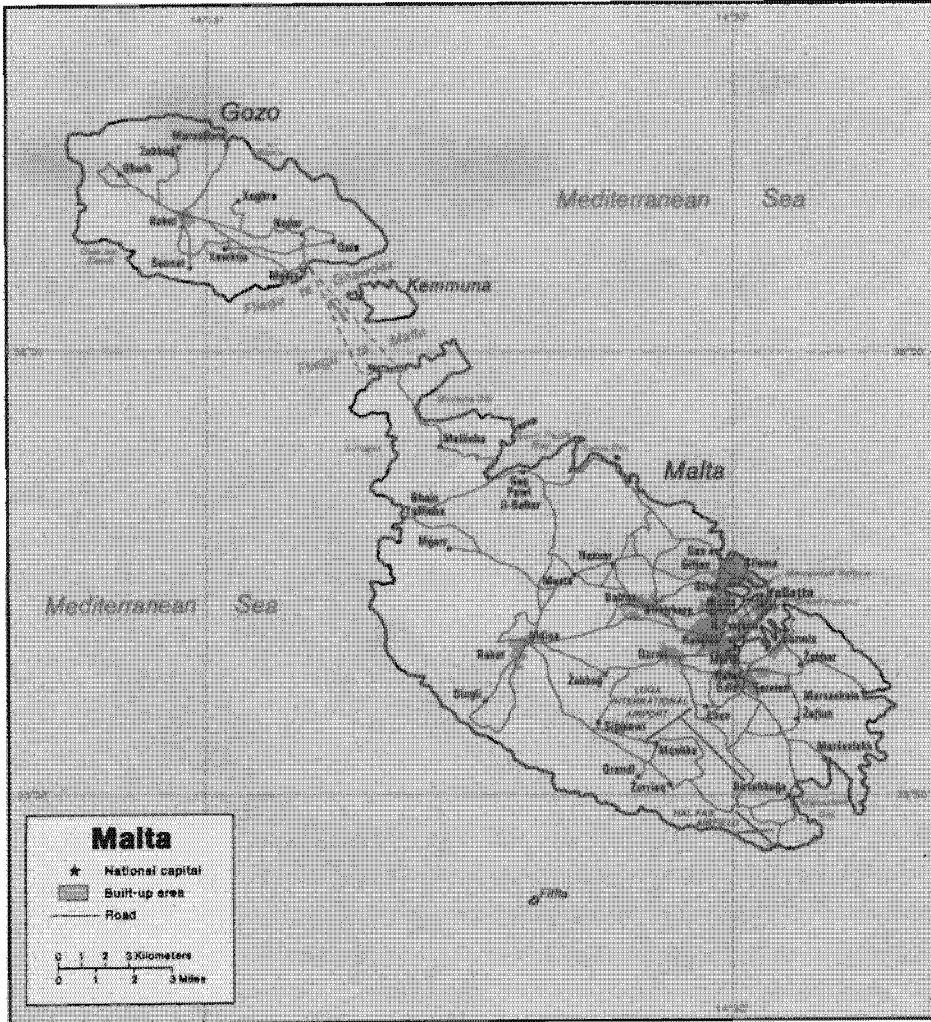
It should be emphasised from the outset that the arguments to be presented in this paper are not intended to serve as evidence that culture is determined by the economic base only, or that there is a one way causation between the economic base and culture.

This paper is organised as follows. Section two describes the economy of Gozo, and focuses on some characteristics which are thought to have a major impact on Gozitan cultures. The third section considers the issue of smallness and insularity and their cultural impact. The sections that follow deal with three specific characteristics of the Gozitan economy, namely emigration and return migration, the high dependence on agriculture and fishing, and the high incidence of self-employment, and assess how these characteristics have influenced the Gozitan culture. The paper is concluded by a prediction that the Gozitan culture will be radically transformed as the Gozitan economy further modernises itself and as certain forms of production become more expensive to maintain, while others become more profitable.

## *I. The Gozitan Economy*

In the past, the Gozitan economy was associated with unemployment and emigration. Between the middle of the fifties and the middle of the eighties, around 14,000 Gozitans had

to emigrate (a figure exceeding the number of births during that period). Until recently, agriculture and fishing were the most important economic activities, but the economy is undergoing a process of modernisation, with tourism and manufacturing increasing their contribution to the economy.



In recent years, employment in Gozo has grown rapidly. Between 1987 and 1999, there was an increase of just under 4000 jobs, so that by the end of the century, gainful employment exceeded 10,000, which is about 33 percent of the Gozitan population.

### The Structure of the Gozitan Economy

There are various ways in which one can describe the structure of an economy. A common method is to look at the percentage contribution of main economic sectors, including the public sector, the manufacturing sector, and the service sector. The relative contribution is generally measured in terms of gainful employment relative to total gainful employment or in terms of sectoral net output relative to GDP.

The structure of the Gozitan economy will in this paper be described in terms of employment (1999), since data on Gozitan sectoral net output is not available.

	Gozo	Malta Island
Public Sector	46%	40%
Private Sector	54	60
of which:		
<i>Agriculture/Fishing</i>	6	2
<i>Industrial Employment</i>	20	22
<i>Services</i>	28	36

#### 1. *Agriculture and Fishing*

It can be observed that there is a notable difference between the structure of the Maltese economy when compared with the Gozitan one, in that the agriculture and fishing sector in Gozo is relatively much larger than that of the Maltese Islands as a whole. As a result, around 30 percent of farmers and fishermen in the islands are Gozitan (Camilleri, 1992), even though the population of Gozo amounts to around 8 percent of the Maltese population. Agriculture and fishing production are associated with certain cultural attitudes which shall be described below.

#### 2. *The Public Sector*

Another important difference between the Gozitan economy and the economy of the Maltese Islands as a whole, is that the percentage of Gozitans employed in the public sector is larger in Gozo than the corresponding percentage for the Maltese islands, even though certain administrative centres such as the Office of the Prime Minister, are located in Malta. This may suggest that there could be over-employment in the Gozitan public sector.

The majority of workers in the public sector in Gozo are employed in five Government departments, namely education, public works, hospitals, agriculture/fishing and public cleaning.

### 3. *The Industrial Sector*

The industrial sector in Gozo, made up mostly of manufacturing and construction activities, is relatively smaller than that of Malta. Up to the middle of the sixties, the manufacturing sector was extremely small, and dominated by industries related to agriculture such as tomato paste production and wine-making, and furniture-making. For this reason many Gozitans, who did not wish to earn a living from farming, and could not find jobs with the public sector, had to emigrate.

The Xewkija Industrial Estate was officially inaugurated in April 1971, and initially employed about 370 employees. The number of employees increased significantly and reached about 1,840 in the late seventies (Azzopardi 1984; Portelli 1989). In the eighties there was considerable loss of employment as factories began to lose markets, and by the middle of the eighties, the number of employees was reduced to about 700 persons. The number of employees at Xewkija is increasing again and reached about 1000 employees by the end 1999.

About 42 percent of the employees at the Xewkija estate work in textiles/garment manufacturing, about 18 percent work in furniture manufacturing, about 16 percent in shoe manufacturing and about 14 percent work in food production. The remaining 10 percent work in tools, tiles and boat manufacturing. There are 14 factories in all, and many of the employees are young females.

### 4. *Market Services*

Market services consists of firms connected with retail and wholesale trades, transport services, banking and finance, and personal services, including those associated with tourism.

Although official statistics show that there are about 2,500 persons employed in this sector, it is well known that a large number of persons operate in this sector informally. This sector is very much dependent on tourist expenditure, which in Gozo is becoming increasingly important (Briguglio 1994; Micallef 1989).

## Labour Supply

Labour supply consists of persons who are gainfully occupied and those registering as unemployed.

There are two important differences in the labour supply of Gozo as compared with that of the Maltese islands as a whole. Firstly the rate of unemployment in Gozo is higher than the average for the Maltese islands, and secondly a number of Gozitans work in Malta. And that there is a third important difference, namely that the number of self-employed persons is relatively higher in Gozo.

### 1. *Unemployment*

Traditionally, the rate of unemployment in Gozo tended to be higher than that of Malta,

although there is some doubt as to whether or not all those who register as unemployed in Gozo are really not gainfully occupied (see Briguglio 1993 for a description of certain characteristics of Gozitan unemployment). A feature of Gozitan unemployment relates to what is termed "hard core unemployment". In Gozo a high proportion of those registering for work tend to spend a relatively long time on the register.

At the end of 1999, the unemployment rate in Gozo was about 5 percent, which is on the low side when compared to previous years. However one should keep in mind that about 6 percent of the Gozitan labour force work in Malta. In the absence of employment opportunities in Malta, the Gozitan unemployment rate would probably have been higher.

## *2. Self-employment*

Another important characteristic of the Gozitan economy relates to the self-employed. About 30% percent of the gainfully employed in Gozo are self-employed, which is much higher than the corresponding percentage of 12 percent in the Maltese Islands.

An important reason that may explain this phenomenon is that in Gozo, there is a large proportion of employment in the agricultural and fishing sectors, as shown above. The prevalence of self-employment has cultural implications, which will be discussed below.

## *II. Insularity and Small Economic Size*

Gozo is small and insular. These realities are associated with certain economic characteristics, which often lead to dependency on other economies (Bertram 1993; Briguglio 1993;1995) and which, as we shall see, have important influences on the culture of the island.

### *Characteristics of a Very Small Economy*

The most common economic characteristics of very small economies, such as the Gozitan one, include the following:

#### *1. Limited Natural Resource Endowments*

Small islands tend to be poor in natural resources and have a relatively high import content. This makes the island highly dependent on other economies.

#### *2. Very Small Domestic Market*

Small size is associated with a small domestic market and with the need to find external markets for economic development. This again leads to very high dependence on economic conditions in the rest of the world.

#### *3. Dependence on a Narrow Range of Products*

In many cases, small size restricts the country's ability to diversify its exports, and this

renders the country dependent on a very narrow range of goods and services. This carries with it the disadvantage associated with having too many eggs in one basket. Gozo, for example is highly dependent of agriculture and tourism.

#### *4. Limited Ability to Influence Domestic Prices*

Small size renders the economy a price-taker of a very high order, since in a small economy importers and exporters are unable to influence prices in the country trading with them.

#### *5. Limited Ability to Exploit Economies of Scale*

Small size renders it difficult for an island to exploit the advantages of economies of scale, mostly due to indivisibilities and limited scope for specialisation. In turn this gives rise to high per unit costs of production, high costs of infrastructural development per capita, high per unit costs of training specialised manpower, and a high degree of dependence on imported technologies, since small size inhibits the development of endogenous technology.

#### *6. Limitations on Domestic Competition*

Domestic competition tends to be curtailed in small economies due to the fact that small size does not support a large number of firms producing a similar product. This generates a tendency towards oligopolistic and monopolistic organisation.

#### *7. Marginalisation*

Small islands tend to be marginalised from the world economy due to their inability to form part of the global strategies of transnational companies. They therefore turn to preferential arrangements for survival, enhancing the culture of dependency.

#### *8. Problems of Public Administration*

Small size creates problems associated with public administration, the most important of which is probably a small manpower resource base from which to draw experienced and efficient administrators. Moreover, many capable persons from the islands emigrate to larger countries where their services are better utilised and where remuneration for their services is higher.

At the same time, in many small islands the public sector tends to be relatively large, because of certain indivisible administrative functions. Moreover, employment in this sector is considered by many to be the best occupation, because it is secure, relatively well paid and permits the employees to have part-time jobs.

An added problem relates to recruitment. In a small island, people know each other well, and are often related to each other. This could work against impartiality and efficiency in the civil service and against a merit-based recruitment and promotions policy. In addition, in many small islands recruitment in the public sector, not being generally motivated by profit and efficiency, lends itself more easily than employment in the private sector for the fostering

of a culture of political patronage.

### *9. Small Size and Culture*

Small size therefore carries with it a number of economic disadvantages, which, it is argued here, have a major impact on the cultures of the islands. In particular, the attitudes of the locals vis-a-vis foreigners are likely to be influenced by the fact that the islanders' survival depends on relations with and conditions in, larger economies.

Another major cultural impact relates to the public sector. Many of the tendencies prevailing in small islands in this regard, described in the previous sub-section, are also found in Gozo, and preference for public sector employment, is a characteristic of the Gozitan labour force (see Galley 1993: 79 for past experience in this regard).

### **Insularity and Transport**

The fact that Gozo is an island leads to a high dependence on sea transport for merchandise and passengers. Transport costs related to merchandise trade of small islands tend to be relatively high. The main reason for this is that a small island usually imports and exports small and fragmented cargoes, constraining its ability to exploit the advantages of modern and technologically advanced means of transport.

Moreover insularity gives rise to problems associated with time delays and unreliability in transport services, especially for merchandise. These create uncertainties in the provision of industrial supplies. This reality has often been identified as a main disincentive for economic development in Gozo.

Another problem is that when transport is not frequent and/or regular, enterprises in islands find it difficult to meet sudden changes in demand, unless they keep large stocks. This implies additional cost of production, associated with tied up capital, rent of warehousing and wages of storekeepers.

#### *1. Transport and Culture*

The transport constraints just described have made the Gozitans extremely conscious of transport problems. Issues related to transport therefore feature very predominantly in Gozitan culture, such as amongst other things, a sharp awareness of weather conditions and of the might of the sea.

The Gozitan business community also assigns major importance to developments in transport arrangements between Gozo and mainland Malta (see for example Magro 1992: 38).

### **Insularity and the Environment**

Small islands like Gozo tend to face large pressures on the environment, and these become more intense with the process of economic development. The recent debate on the building

of an airstrip is a case in point. To some this is considered to be an important requirement for the development of upmarket tourism in Gozo, but its construction is likely to have large undesirable environmental impacts.

Small islands that seek to develop economically tend to experience a fast depletion of agricultural land, accompanying increased demand for residential and industrial construction, and a very intense use of the coastal zone, accompanying the growth of tourism. These problems are of course also faced by larger countries undergoing a process of economic development, but their effect on small islands is likely to be much stronger due to their small size.

### *1. The Environment and Culture*

These environmental realities, as expected, have an impact on the cultures of islands. The Gozitans, for example, are very conscious of the services offered by the physical environment, since it directly effects the livelihood of a large section of the population. Although much damage has already occurred by the process of economic development, there is a growing awareness among the Gozitan population that environmental protection should be placed high on the policy agenda of the government.

## *III. Emigration and Return Migration*

Emigration from Gozo is mostly conditioned by economic conditions in the island (see King and Strachen 1979). Return migration is also to a large extent conditioned by economic conditions, in the sense that many Gozitans return to their homeland either after accumulating sufficient wealth abroad, or on becoming aware that employment conditions in Gozo have improved. Added to these economic reasons there are non-economic ones, such as that for many Gozitan emigrants, ties with the island of their birth remain strong.

The impact of emigration on the Gozitan culture is multifaceted, and only the most conspicuous effects are considered here.

### *Changes in Demography and the Organisation of the Household*

A large proportion of emigrants were males of prime age. Many were married, and left Gozo on their own. This meant, among other things, a demographic imbalance, in terms of gender proportions and in terms of age cohorts. It also meant that many husbands and fathers left the island for a long time, sometimes permanently, leaving the rest of the family residing in Gozo. This gave rise to changes in the behaviour and organisation of many Gozitan households. One such impact was that many wives and mothers became effectively heads of their families.

### *1. Changes in Material Welfare*

Emigration often permits improvements in material welfare of the family, through amongst



other things, remittances from abroad by the emigrant member of the household. Gozitan emigrants are known to be hard-working, and many have returned to Gozo after having amassed considerable wealth in Australia, the USA, Canada and other countries. It goes without saying that changes in material wealth have a direct impact on the consumption and savings behaviour of the households in question, which in turn effect the overall culture of the population of the island. This impact is mostly evident through better houses, and improvements in the overall standard of living of many Gozitan households.

## 2. *Changes in the Modes of Behaviour*

Apart from bringing income with them, returned migrants also import modes of behaviour from abroad. Although many Gozitans emigrate to areas where other Gozitans have migrated before them, forming Gozitan communities abroad, they are exposed to foreign cultures and absorb aspects of it. They therefore return to Gozo with different views regarding education, social interaction, religion and so on.

## 3. *Changes in the Spoken Language*

Another impact of returned migration relates to the language. One notices in Gozo that certain sections of the population use a Gozitan dialect interspersed with American or Australian phrases. This may be due to various reasons, including that returned migrants find that they can express themselves more readily by using foreign terms commonly used in the country to which they had emigrated and that using American or English expressions upgrades the social standing of the speaker.

## 4. *Changes in Gozitan Tastes*

The increase in incomes of returned migrants has enabled many Gozitans to afford to have a house built for their family—very often with a style of architecture reflecting foreign influences. In many cases, the imported architectural style has intricate stonework (in Maltese: *lavur*) superimposed on it—permitting the occupant to show off his or her material success. As Borg (1986) says, “returned migrants’ dwellings are immediately recognisable. Architecturally they are hybrids between local styles or the bungalow and suburban villa common in North America and Australia... they appear as alien intrusions into the village shape” (see also King and Strachen 1979).

Many houses of Gozitan returned migrants also sport an oversized flagpole on the roof, from which an oversized US, Australian, Canadian or British flag is flown. Such houses are often given a name, written on a slab on the side of the door, associated with the country from which the ex-migrant returned (see also Galley 1993: 188). In some cases a sculptured symbol of the same country is placed very prominently and conspicuously on the facade of the house, generally on the roof parapet wall.

There could be a number of motives for such manifestations. It could be an expression of

gratitude towards the country which had received the emigrant and which had helped him improve his material welfare. It could also be an exhibition of material success and social status by the returned migrant. There could also be an element of pique and rivalry (two common traits in Malta and Gozo) between one returned migrant and another.

#### 5. *Internal Migration*

Many Gozitans work in Malta. The persons involved are very often young and single, with a relatively high level of education.

Internal migration carries with it a number of hardships to the Gozitans involved, including costs of travelling, early rising, fatigue, time wasted in travelling, insufficient facilities at Cirkewwa and Mgarr harbours, accommodation costs, separation from the family, and difficulties of integration with Maltese society (see Mizzi 1988).

Like international migrants, Gozitans who travel often to Malta have an impact on the Gozitan culture by importing habits, tastes, language, religious attitudes and other traits from Malta.

### *IV. High Dependence on Agriculture and Fishing*

Traditionally the Gozitan economy was based on agriculture and fishing and dependence on these two sectors is still relatively high, as shown previously in Table. There are certain forms of behaviour and cultural attitudes usually associated with the farming and fishing communities, and these are commonly found in Gozo.

#### 1. *Understanding of the Rhythms of Nature*

Farmers and fishermen depend on the weather much more than workers in the industrial and the public sectors. The failures and successes of farmers and fishermen are only partially dependent on their hard work, since nature plays an important part in this regard.

Moreover, their work pattern is influenced to a large extent by seasonal variations. As a result, persons engaged in these sectors tend to develop a keen awareness of the rhythms of nature, an ability to forecast weather changes, and a high degree of recognition of the power of natural phenomenon.

#### 2. *Fatalistic Attitudes and Superstitious Belief*

Belief in supernatural forces tends to be very strong in the farming and fishing community, and many farmers are guided by the belief that there is some form of destiny which cannot be avoided. This probably results from closeness to nature and natural phenomenon, and the inability to control natural forces associated with weather on land and sea.

Superstitious beliefs abound in Gozo, and these are often intermingled with catholic religious practices (see Galley 1993: 200). Fishermen, for example, recite special secret exhortations to counteract the forces of a water spout (Attard, 1995). Farmers place cattle

horns on the roofs and in other prominent places to avert bad luck and to counteract the evil eye.

### 3. *The Gozitan Diet*

Gozo is known for its variety of fresh food, probably the result of the prevalence of farming and fishing. A large proportion of Gozitans also grow vegetables in their own garden, a practice which was more prevalent in the past (see Galley 1993: 24). Cheese and wine making is common among Gozitan farmers. There is as a result a distinct character in Gozitan food, mainly because some ingredients are easily recognisable as made in Gozo.

### 4. *Independent Attitudes and Utilisation of Family Labour*

Farmers and fisherman are generally independent producers, tend to be suspicious of government interference and prefer not to divulge the financial outcomes of their business to outsiders. They also tend to utilise family labour. In farming communities it is common sight to see women and children working in the fields and helping out in chores associated with this occupation. These traits are common features of firms run by self-employed persons, and they are discussed separately below.

## V. *High Incidence of Self-Employment*

The prevalence of agriculture, fishing and service activities in the Gozitan economy, and the relatively small size of firms in Gozo, are associated with a high incidence of self-employment in Gozo.

This has an impact on the Gozitan way of life, because self-employment is linked to, amongst other things, a culture of tax evasion, a high degree of attachment to the business, independent attitudes, a strong dislike of government interference, a high degree of employment by family members, and conservative attitudes regarding technology and management practice.

### 1. *Tax Evasion and the Informal Economy*

Tax evasion often requires concealing one's income, in other words participating in what is known as the underground economy, which, in Gozo, is rampant. Associated with the underground economy one is likely to find illegal employment of persons and a distorted tax burden, with wage earners bearing a proportionately higher tax burden.

The impact of underground economic activity on the Gozitan way of life is multifaceted, and includes a culture of misreporting business accounts and a preference for currency as a monetary asset.

However certain developments such as the introduction of the Value Added Tax and the new investment opportunities that are emerging, are working against the further growth, and possibly leading to the contraction of underground economic activity in Gozo. The Value

Added Tax is making it increasingly difficult for producers to procure supplies and to get paid for their services without formally registering for a VAT registration number. The new investment opportunities are pushing up the opportunity costs of keeping currency at home for tax evasion purposes.

## *2. Independent Attitudes*

Boissevain (1991: 2) argues that an important thread running through the literature on small entrepreneurs is the value they attach to independence that being on their own gives them. They therefore tend to strongly dislike government interference. This is especially so if such interferences restricts their ability to juggle their accounts, as was the case recently when the government imposed the use of fiscal cash registers.

## *3. High Degree of Commitment to the Business*

The self-employed have a high degree of attachment to their business mainly because they are motivated by self-interest in the well-being of the firm. They work overtime and their working week often extends to Sundays. This workaholic attitude is prevalent in Gozo.

## *4. Utilisation of Family Labour*

Firms run by self-employed persons tend to utilise family labour, because this is usually cheaper and more loyal than hired labour. Family members often work without a workbook and do not involve the firm in high leave or sick leave costs. Moreover, the costs of hiring and firing family labour are practically nil. For these reasons, employment of family labour, including children, is a common occurrence in Gozo.

The question of child labour was studied by Cremona (1989) on the basis of a survey which he carried out in November 1989. He found that 49 percent of school boys and 17 percent of school girls (13 to 17 years old) worked, mostly in family business.

## *5. Conservative Business Attitudes*

Small firms tend to utilise traditional technology, and tend to have old fashioned methods of management. Such firms are therefore not generally associated with innovation and efficiency - even though the owners work very hard to ensure the survival of the firm. On the positive side, however, self-employed persons tend to be flexible, less bureaucratic and do not experience waste of time and money in industrial relations problems.

## *6. Enterprising Females*

Gozitan females tend to be very enterprising. Women are often engaged in knitting and lace-making, running of shops, renting of property and conducting a wide variety of other business. This cultural trait could possibly be related to the well-entrenched self-employment tradition in Gozo.

### 7. *Frugality*

Another cultural trait in Gozo is frugality, which could be explained in terms of the grave economic difficulties experienced by Gozitans in the past. In addition, however, there could also be a connection with the prevalence of self-employment in Gozo, since running one's own business makes one very conscious of the hard work that goes into making money from a small business.

## VI. *Conclusion: The Modernisation of the Economy*

This paper has attempted to show that economic conditions in Gozo have major impacts on the culture of the island. It has been argued that the traditional dependence on agriculture and fishing, the economic uncertainty prevailing in the past, and the prevalence of public sector and self-employment are important underlying economic realities which have to a large extent moulded the Gozitan culture.

One should expect that as the Gozitan economy changes, the culture of the island will also change—although as stated in the introduction, the relationship should not be interpreted as being strictly deterministic and as having a one-way causation.

The main changes that have occurred in recent decades and are still taking place relate to the erosion of the dominance traditional agriculture, and the growth of modern manufacturing and modern market services.

The establishment of the industrial estate at Xewkija in the early seventies, has ushered in new attitudes towards female employment in Gozo. As stated earlier, there was a decline in employment in the estate in the eighties, but the trend has been reversed in recent years. The majority of employees at the estate are young women, and this has had a significant impact on the role of women in Gozo.

The market services industry in Gozo is being transformed as modern services, such as those associated with finance, communication and tourism, provide new employment opportunities for the Gozitans.

Tourism in particular has an important demonstration effect on the Gozitan culture (see Inguanes 1994), as tourists expose the Gozitan community to influences of foreign cultures.

Business associated with evening entertainment, some of which is induced by tourism, has also had an important impact on the Gozitan culture, especially with regard to Gozitan youth, who frequently discos and night spots.

In Gozo there has also been a growth of what are known as culture industries—a the term referring to such activity as theatre and music, television and radio, publishing of books and newspapers and sport. With the growth of tourism and the improvements in material welfare of the Gozitans, the contribution of these industries to the Gozitan economy has increased considerably. Since these industries are directly connected with culture, one expects that their impact on the Gozitan culture is likely to be considerable.

By way of conclusion therefore, it is likely that as the Gozitan economy continues to transform and modernise itself, the Gozitan culture will also change. Whether this will be good or bad for Gozo is a matter of debate, since such developments very often involve a trade-off between the preservation of the Gozitan culture as we know them, and improvements in material welfare as perceived by the policy makers and by people engaged in economic activities which transform their own culture.

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