

‘The door is open to everyone’: The public libraries of Gozo

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A B S T R A C T

Almost every village on Gozo, Malta’s second island, supports a library despite the small population of the island, the general decline in funding for libraries in western Europe and the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on public services. Public libraries are well-established in Malta and, due to the legacy of colonialism, are largely modelled on the British system. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research in Gozo’s public libraries, this paper explores the ways in which these spaces are used, who uses them and to what extent they are changing or remaining stagnant. While some individual librarians were making innovations to attract more borrowers and update the image of the public library service, many libraries conformed to the stereotype of a quiet, shabby room that only interested a few loyal borrowers. The paper draws out the tensions between Gozitan librarians’ claims that libraries are well-used and appreciated and the observable lack of patrons during much of the fieldwork. I conclude that public libraries on Gozo are essentially parochial in nature and that while it is seen as important to have village libraries, many people are less interested in actually using them.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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Gozo, Malta, public libraries, librarians, parochialism, children, reading

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Despite its small size Gozo is home to a high number of public libraries, one for almost every village on the island, from the General Central Public Library (GCPL), with its themed monthly book displays, to the two-room branch library in Ghasri, a village of only 500 inhabitants. Struck by this, I set out to learn how libraries have endured on Gozo despite technological advances, the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in lifestyles and entertainment preferences. I tried to understand many aspects of libraries, including the effect of widespread bilingualism, people's expectations of a library and how library usage relates to age and gender. At the heart of my research is a tension between librarians' claims that there is still demand for libraries and reading on Gozo and the general lack of patrons and the comments of some booksellers suggesting that this is, in fact, no longer the case. It appears that libraries may be regarded as a good thing to *have* rather than an important thing to *use*. Though, as my research showed, by 2022/2023 several Gozitan librarians were making innovations to attract more borrowers and update the image of the public library service.

I originally became interested in libraries as social spaces after observing that public libraries in Ireland are expected to be multifunctional, to the point that sometimes their core function – lending books – can become obscured or marginalised. I was curious to see whether this was the case on Gozo or whether libraries continued to conform to a more traditional pattern. Studying any kind of free service allows consideration of ideas of entitlement, ownership and access. Libraries in particular are unusual spaces that are, in theory, equally available to everyone but in practice are associated with certain rules of usage. Throughout this research I have attempted to understand how people use libraries on Gozo, and how their usage relates to the aims and expectations of local librarians. After giving a brief history of public libraries in Malta and outlining my methods, I discuss the presence of Maltese and English reading material and the people who can be found using the libraries before considering recent changes and innovations. My research suggests that Gozitan public libraries are essentially parochial in nature and this is manifested in how people use libraries and the buildings and the stock that form them.

History of public libraries in Malta

The following could be regarded as the core elements of the modern public library: that it be free, open to the public and provides a range of services that facilitate education, culture and citizenship. Libraries that meet these requirements can be seen as having both practical and symbolic roles in public order and aspects of welfare provision (Bridges 2010: 14-17). However, there are deep conflicts over what services a library should provide and whether it has an obligation to promote certain traditional values, or to adapt to the needs and desires of the public (Bridges 2010: 35-37).

The current structure of Malta's public library system owes a lot to the country's position as a British protectorate/crown colony from 1800. Taxpayer-funded libraries came into being in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, where the efforts of major philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie helped to promote libraries as a worthy cause for public spending (Pettegree and der Weduwen 2021: 11). According to Malta Libraries (the organisation that administrates the public library network), the first public library in Malta was established in the early nineteenth century and was initially funded by user fees before becoming free to access.

In 1920, a study (Malta Libraries n.d.) suggested setting up village libraries so that people in rural areas could access books, meaning that small and accessible libraries have been part of Maltese and Gozitan life for over a century. The first district libraries in Gozo were established in primary schools in 1925 as part of an expansion of the already successful library programme on Malta (Malta Libraries n.d.). There was persistent discussion in the nineteenth century over whether the purpose of the British model of public libraries was to provide books that educated or that gave pleasure to the reader (Pettegree and der Weduwen 2021: 8-10). However, these ongoing concerns were largely subsumed by funding cuts to libraries in western countries since the 1980s, as free-market ideology prompted a widespread retreat of the state from the public sphere (for example, Flood 2020; Irish Independent 2013; New York Times 2023), including in Malta (Depares 2014). The continuation of these cuts has threatened the very existence of libraries in some places and forced the diversification of services in others (Pettegree and der Weduwen 2021: 155).



The door sign outside Xewkija library, it caught my eye and appealed to me when I visited.

In the 1970s, the national and public libraries services of Malta were separated, with the National Library remaining a facility for research while the public libraries focused on lending reading material to the general population (Malta Libraries n.d.). The branch libraries that many villages in Malta and Gozo now benefit from were opened in the 1980s and were intended to meet the specific needs of each village, with 47 branch libraries currently operating across Malta. All branch libraries are located in the building of a primary school or the local council (Malta Libraries n.d.), although there have been attempts to integrate them into civic centres that provide a range of services to local residents (Biggs 1973: 168-169). Libraries have received more attention and investment since the early 2000s, with local councils becoming more involved in their running (Muscat 2004: 196), although my conversations with librarians suggested that there was little money available for necessary refurbishments.

Methods

The research for this paper was conducted over three weeks in 2022 while I was a student at the Off the Beaten Track Field School on Gozo, Malta. I had not intended to research libraries when I first arrived and only decided on the topic after stumbling upon the GCPL in Saint Francis Square in Gozo's capital Rabat. I had a prior interest in the operation and use of public libraries and it occurred to me that the library is an environment rarely explored in ethnographic research, despite being an accepted and embedded institution in many communities (Bridges 2010: 10). Communities often take pride in their public libraries and regard them as central to everyday life (Bridges 2010: 10). Once I discovered that, despite a widespread decline in funding for public libraries in western Europe (Depares 2014; Flood 2020; Irish Independent 2013; New York Times 2023), Gozo retains a dozen branch libraries, I decided to pursue ethnographic research in these small village libraries to try and understand how they continue to survive and what purposes they serve.

Ethnography in a library may seem like a strange idea, since libraries are fundamentally quiet places rather than venues for chatting. However, they often manage to fulfil a range of functions for the community and thus become sites of metaphorical social conversation (Bridges 2010: 153; Pettegree and der Weduwen 2021: 155). Although there has been increasing interest in libraries as sites of

ethnographic research since the 1990s, they remain very largely overlooked (Lanclos and Asher 2016: 1). Lanclos and Asher characterise the state of anthropology in libraries as 'ethnographish' rather than ethnographic, since anthropology work in libraries has often been narrow and short-term with a focus on gathering specific sorts of data rather than considering context (2016: 2). 'Ethnographish' projects have been concerned with understanding user behaviour and making policy decisions rather than generating 'thick description' (Lanclos and Asher 2016: 3), making the apparent increase in library ethnography somewhat of a misleading phenomenon. In later writing, Lanclos has continued to argue for more qualitative approaches to understanding how libraries are used, rather than relying on quantitative user experience methods (2020: 2-3). User experiences approaches have meant that ethnography in libraries has often had corporate overtones with the explicit goals of solving problems rather than exploring how the space is used (Lanclos 2020: 13). This prevents ethnography from achieving its full potential to reveal the stories of the people who use libraries (Lanclos 2020: 16). Despite Lanclos and Asher's concerns about short-term ethnography projects in libraries, I had to complete my fieldwork under time constraints and adopted a multi-sited approach in response to these limitations with a focus on gathering qualitative data through interviews.

Multi-sited ethnography refers, as the name suggests, to ethnographic research spread over multiple spaces that pays attention to the relationships between those different spaces (Bocagni 2019: 2). Though typically applied on a larger scale (Bocagni 2019: 1), multi-sited ethnography's comparative aspect is transferrable to smaller networks (2019: 7), such as the libraries and villages on Gozo. This method's broad approach meant that there was a risk of losing depth (Bocagni 2019: 3), but it seemed a practical method to apply because it would have been hard to become deeply immersed in a single field site in three weeks.

Further, multi-sited ethnography has been criticised for being 'diluted' or overly focused on organisations and institutions, rather than enabling in-depth understandings of everyday life (Coleman and Hellermann 2011: 6). In this case, however, the role of an organisation in everyday life was precisely the focus of my interest. I visited seven libraries during my fieldwork and interviewed their librarians. These interviews were unstructured and usually informal, often being conducted while I stood at

the librarian's desk or as I was shown around the library. I also spoke to some library patrons and spent time exploring the book stock in the libraries as a form of participant observation. There were few patrons in most of the libraries when I visited. I explore the possible reasons for this emptiness later, but a recurring contradiction in my research was the difference between observing low footfall and being told by librarians that reading and visiting the library was still popular in Malta. I also spent a lot of time discreetly tidying shelves, observing patrons/customers interacting with libraries and bookshops and flicking through the stock to see which books were borrowed more frequently and how people treated them. I photographed most of the libraries I visited and explored each village to understand the library's location in relation to other services/important places. I monitored the website and Facebook page of Malta Libraries during my fieldwork and explored them in detail after having left the field. I also visited several bookshops and a book fair on Gozo to speak to booksellers about their impressions of the public libraries and habits of reading among Gozitans. Finally, I coded my fieldnotes to find the key themes from my interviews and wrote further reflective fieldnotes.

I received permission from the National Librarian/Chief Executive of Malta Libraries to conduct my research but, since local Gozitan councils are heavily involved in the management of their local libraries, one or two librarians were unwilling to speak to me unless I requested permission from the relevant council. I therefore decided to exclude those libraries from this paper. I have anonymised all my participants and their places of work, but there is a limit to how thorough this anonymisation can be. Several of my interlocutors were amused by my earnest assurances of anonymity, pointing out that they are better placed than me to understand that Gozo is a small island with a relatively low number of librarians and booksellers, making them potentially recognisable to those who cared to work it out. This thought did not disincite anyone from participating, however, and I have adhered to the requests of some interlocutors who shared more personal information in our interviews that they did not want published.

Parochialism: Having everything next door

Ethnographies of public libraries in the UK and the US have characterised them as social places that can serve the public good and fulfil important functions in the community. These conceptions dominate theories about libraries due to the lack of comparable anthropological research in other countries (for example, Barbakoff 2010; Birdi, Wilson and Cocker 2008; Bridges 2010). Libraries have been described as spaces that people trust and where they feel welcomed, but also as strongly associated with stagnation and fading relevance or appeal (Black and Crann 2002: 151; Goulding 2006a: 255). Different government policies and reports in the UK have painted contrasting pictures of libraries, with some describing them as vital to communities and others declaring them to be outdated. Goulding observes that these two descriptions are reconcilable and may both be true, as libraries may still be valued in theory but in practice be increasingly rundown (2006b: 5).

I believe that this may be the case in Malta, in that libraries are expected to exist but are infrequently used. It is taken to be part of the natural order of things for each village to have its own library of which its residents can be vaguely aware and proud, making them closely comparable to other more extensively studied parochial institutions, such as churches, football clubs and band societies (Boissevain 1993). One of my key interlocutors, Ġorġ, described this as part of the Gozitan mentality, saying 'we like to have everything next to us', which reflects the tendency for each village to have its own set of services even though it is usually only a few miles away from the next village. Similarly, he maintained that 'the door [of the library] is open to everyone'. This sentiment is open to interpretation. It could mean that the library welcomes all comers and their varying needs, but most of the users I observed were white Maltese from the immediate area or a neighbouring village, which suggests that libraries are not appealing or welcoming to everyone.

Despite this apparently friendly invitation, many of Gozo's libraries presented a dismal picture at first glance, as they are often furnished with assorted office furniture and collections of wall décor that look like purchases from garage sales. Where care had been taken to make a library look more appealing it often appeared amateurish and as if it had been done on a tight budget, such as laminated paper cards that denote different letters of the alphabet in the fiction section of one library. Books were frequently shelved incorrectly and some libraries had half-empty

shelves while others were forced to stack books on top of each other because they lacked enough bookcases. In some ways, Gozitan libraries still conform to the stereotype of libraries as dusty and overlooked, with several of my interlocutors commenting on how some libraries feel drab and dark.

Language: Political and cultural interactions in the library

Public libraries on Gozo stock Maltese and English books in recognition of the fact that most people on the island speak both languages, and I soon became familiar with the red and green stickers on the book jackets that denoted English and Maltese works respectively in many library branches. Some of the libraries that I visited also stocked Italian, French and German literature in varying proportions. Despite stocking a range of popular English-language authors such as Danielle Steele (an author of romantic fiction), Ian Rankin (a Scottish crime novelist) and James Patterson (who primarily writes thrillers/detective stories), not to mention extensive collections of formulaic Mills & Boone romance novels, Maltese libraries actually have their niche in their ability to provide Maltese-language books.

Romantic fiction in Maltese is immensely popular, especially with older patrons, and is hard to buy online. While Biggs's (1973: 164) comment that 'the majority of those over twenty-five using district libraries want only the romantic novel in Maltese', is no longer strictly accurate, Maltese romantic fiction remains highly popular. One librarian observed that recent rebranding of Maltese books has caused even more borrowers to be interested in them, since the attractive new covers catch the eye. Through speaking to an experienced Maltese bookseller, I came to understand that the market for Maltese fiction is so small that there is little room for experimentation. Therefore, some authors choose to publish romance novels for which there is an expected audience, leaving readers to turn to English fiction for more variety. Librarians repeatedly said that most of their patrons were interested in Maltese romance novels or English thrillers/crime or women's fiction. They gave priority to meeting those demands, in the expectation that doing so would consistently attract certain people to the libraries, rather than seeking to draw new audiences in with more innovative offerings.

My interlocutors had different opinions about the equal presence of English alongside Maltese, especially when it came to children's books. A bookshop owner and children's author observed that it is 'unfortunately' increasingly popular among children to read and speak in English, although some families try to encourage reading in Maltese because children need to be proficient in it to succeed at school. Boissevain, the definitive ethnographer of Malta, pointed out the importance that the Maltese attached to literacy, and particularly to learning English, because that language was associated with social advancement and job opportunities (1993: 11), and that remained largely true in 2022/2023.

On the other hand, several interlocutors reported that some parents deliberately speak in Maltese to their children. A librarian who had been in the profession for more than twenty years was more critical, saying that by 'forcing' their children to read in Maltese parents ran the risk of alienating them from the language, with others agreeing that it was 'counterproductive' and 'the wrong mentality'. There are, for instance, parents who make sure that their children borrow at least one book in Maltese when they visit the library even if their preference is for English books. However, there was a strong consensus that Maltese parents want their children to be competent in both languages even though they used books in different ways to achieve that goal, with some promoting English reading and others encouraging Maltese.

The fact that libraries stock Maltese and English books in approximately equal numbers is a physical representation of the use of both languages in Maltese life. By doing so, Maltese libraries enable parents to encourage their children to increase their proficiency in both languages, with some parents emphasising one language over the other depending on their priorities. Additionally, libraries provide adult borrowers with easy access to the ever-popular romance novels that have an important position in Maltese-language publishing. This taste for romance is also reflected in the English-language book stock. Danielle Steele, for example, had a shelf to herself in several village libraries. The presence of both languages side-by-side in Malta is due in part to the history of British colonialism and in part to the continued dominance of English as an international language for trade and tourism while Maltese continues to be the everyday language of life, and this simultaneous usage can be seen in decision to curate sections for Maltese and English books in the village libraries of Gozo.

Social inclusion: Who uses the library?

While there have been deliberate attempts to use libraries to reduce social exclusion (Goulding 2006a: 205), libraries on Gozo to some extent carry out this role informally. Libraries are often places where it is possible to be in the presence of others rather than actively socialising (Bridges 2010: 153). From my observations in various libraries, it seemed that people were more likely to socialise with the librarian rather than other patrons, whether it was older people coming in for a chat or borrowers looking for recommendations. The librarians were generally willing to make conversation and make the experience more interactive, often knowing about the lives and doings of their borrowers.

The library as a social network node appears to be used by a relatively small number of people, with one librarian telling me that 'you have to work with [the] people that come here', suggesting that the libraries receive their patrons passively rather than deliberately trying to attract certain groups. In this sense they are neutral and non-exclusive but also only available and appealing to those who are interested and feel comfortable to come into the library in the first place. I was told that 'all people use the library' but there were notable demographic absences, particularly young and middle-aged men. These absences made those who reversed the trend especially noticeable, such as a father carrying his delighted little daughter around the GCPL on his shoulders.

Certainly, COVID-19 pandemic restrictions had taken a toll on library usage. Librarians told me that people had been afraid to return to the libraries even when there was more freedom of movement, while events such as school visits had been curtailed. Additionally, as one of my interlocutors put it, 'the lifestyle of reading' is getting less popular and this is a situation familiar to librarians across western Europe (for example, Bridges 2010: 179-180). One librarian described her job as 'relaxing work', saying '[I] get used to the people who come', a phrase that suggests the familiarity of a few regular patrons and little change or innovation. Though librarians described different patterns of usage, from people who pop into the library while waiting for the bus to those who see it as a 'second home', I was rarely able to observe this in practice.

Learning to share: Children in the library

The librarians to whom I spoke became most animated when talking about the children who use the libraries. Parents, almost always mothers, bring their children to the library. The tendency for mothers to be responsible for introducing their children to the library is widespread (Bridges 2010: 101-102). Additionally, some class groups visit with their teachers, especially when the library is in the same building as the village primary school, and children start to visit alone from the age of about 12. My interlocutors did not specify whether the library rules require younger children to be accompanied but it is also possible that children start to visit independently around the age of 12 because it is just after the transition from primary to secondary school (Government of Malta n.d.). One of the librarians had a particular affinity with the children who use her library because she formerly worked as a teacher. The library that she runs is decorated with children's art and stuffed toys for the families that visit on Saturdays. She goes to great lengths to stock books that will appeal to children, even going to the trouble of buying some books especially because she knows certain children who would like to read them. Older children visit the library less often however, partly because they travel to Rabat to go to secondary school and have more schoolwork to occupy their time. Libraries are also sometimes a place to do schoolwork or to research school projects.

Black and Crann observe that people are more likely to use the library if they are taken as children and that using the library alone can be a marker of independence for young people (2002: 152-154). Visiting a library is typically regarded as important for children's development, as it is a place where children can learn to read for education and leisure and accrue the accompanying benefits (Goulding 2006a: 272; Newman 2007: 903). However, Goulding argues that young people can also feel alienated from libraries and have a sense that they are spaces intended for their elders (2004: 4-5). One librarian told me that she reads children's books in order to give better recommendations and was keen to re-start the storytelling sessions that her library has hosted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though she believed teenagers avoid the library because they have other sources of entertainment and more demands on their time, she had organised a separate young adult section, which many other libraries lacked.

The librarians spoke most fondly of their interactions with children, with one noting how their interest is often piqued through school visits and they return unaccompanied afterwards to borrow more books. One librarian told me that parents teach their children to be quiet in the library as a way of showing respect for the space but that parents who are too insistent that their children must read could provoke them into damaging the books as an act of rebellion. This librarian was not standing for any of that, asserting, affectionately but firmly, 'I make sure the kids take good care of the books', demonstrating how the library can be a place to learn pro-social behaviour by interacting with items that do not belong to them in a public space.

Despite this fondness and enthusiasm for the younger borrowers, the complete silence in most libraries coupled with the small numbers of patrons gave the sense that the libraries lacked energy and life. My research was limited by my visiting during June, which is apparently the quietest month for library usage because school children are sitting their exams. Certainly, several of the libraries I visited were strangely devoid of people other than the solitary librarian. However, I am uncertain to what extent the quietness of the libraries was because of the exam season and to what extent this was being used as an excuse or explanation. As I have noted above, it is likely that libraries in Gozo are always quiet and could be said to be 'a bit drab, humdrum, ticking over at [their] own pace', to echo the description of life in a Welsh library during the autumn months given by Bridges (2010: 82).

Change or stagnation?

My initial impression of Gozo's libraries was that they subscribed to the age-old adage, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', in the sense that they conformed in many ways to conventional, even conservative, expectations of library provision and had somehow failed (or refused?) to join the technological revolution that is happening in libraries elsewhere in Europe and North America. Malta's libraries are not moribund, however, with the online cataloguing system being one of the biggest innovations in recent years. Universally referred to by librarians as 'The System' as if a person in its own right, the digital catalogue was introduced in the early 2000s and allows patrons to check where a certain book can be found and librarians to see which books are on loan or overdue. Younger staff members emphasised to me the importance of online membership registration, the use of social media

for advertising library outreach services and the availability of ebooks via the library website and various apps, but when asked about recent changes older librarians invariably referred to 'The System'.

As far as I could glean from most of the librarians to whom I spoke, libraries on Gozo have little pretention to digital accessibility or inclusion and their primary interest in acquiring anything new is buying enough popular titles to satisfy their borrowers. Most librarians spoke proudly about their steady acquisitions of small quantities of new stock, which is sourced individually at bargain bookshops using the annual budget that is granted to each library by Malta Libraries. In this way, different librarians can buy stock that they feel will be popular in their own villages, though in practice I found the book stock at most libraries very similar. Choosing book stock is a skill that helps to attract patrons from other villages, with some librarians proud of their ability in this area and others praising their colleagues for having appealing collections. Libraries on Gozo also accept donations of second-hand books from the public although one of my key interlocutors, Simone, told me that they cannot put everything they receive on the shelves but 'we try to be nice to [the donors]'. Donations are usually accepted even if they will not be suitable for the library (such as outdated reference books) to avoid patrons feeling that their offerings are not appreciated.

Simone had been spearheading more radical changes since arriving at one of the libraries as the new senior member of staff. A talkative and creative woman, she was determined to make the atmosphere more welcoming and improve the library both as a place for patrons to use and as a place for staff to work. The changes that she initiated included redecoration, new displays and updating the book stock and were achieved on a shoestring budget, with a particular focus on upcycling material in creative ways. Declaring that 'people will still need the library, [so] we are doing everything possible to attract patrons', Gorg, an experienced librarian working under Simone, explained how much even cosmetic changes to the library had affected how people used it. Gorg described Simone in terms that suggested she had been a breath of fresh air to this library on Gozo, saying 'she asked "what do you want to change?"' and then proceeded to work with a limited budget to make the changes suggested by the existing staff members who knew the library and its clientele.

The librarians explained that they wanted to add colour and light to the library, with a particular emphasis on making the children's section appealing. Since the children's section is at the front of the building, its renovation means that the whole library presents a fresher face. Once dark, drab and 'all brown', it is now enlivened with fresh paint, colourful woodcuts on the walls and novelty shelving, all of which was inexpensively sourced and achieved through the library staff helping out in their own time. The librarians tell me that the bookshelf shaped like a toy car is popular with young children, who like to sit on it and pretend to drive.

When the refurbishment was recent, people visited just to see the changes. The librarians responsible for the renovation recounted that while previously, 'kids were not motivated [to visit the library]', now more children visit and they borrow an average of four books each. Indeed, as I sat and wrote up my notes in the children's section one morning, a primary-school-aged girl came and did just that, borrowing several English language books including one of Francesca Simon's popular *Horrid Henry* titles as well as Maltese children's books that her mother picked out. This success had given Simone hope that similar change could be adopted in other libraries on Gozo.

These changes, however, can only be achieved by working with the local councils. Though the branch libraries on Gozo are controlled by Malta Libraries, I discovered during my conversations with librarians that the local councils have considerable input into their operation, particularly since they are often located in the same building. Goulding observes that the running of libraries can lead to tensions with local authorities seeking control over library provisions, while their priorities and methods may clash with national policy (2006a: 151). In this case, local councils supplement rather than detract from local libraries. Some councils share their buildings with the village library and others pay librarians to work extra hours, allowing libraries to be open for longer. Public libraries in Malta were to some extent built as *addenda*, being deliberately located in primary schools or local council buildings and therefore losing some opportunities to have their own unique identities. Within a village, however, the library's location alongside other essential services such as the primary school, the post office, the council administrative offices and the health centre means that it enjoys a central position in its parochial world.

Future directions for research

There are various directions that future research into this topic could take including doing embedded ethnography at a single library over a longer time period rather than adopting the multi-sited approach that I chose for this research. That approach was one of the main limitations of this research because I was unable to learn how borrowers used a single library at different times of the week or see whether the changes that Simone had initiated were imitated by other branches. However, an expansion of the multi-sited approach to libraries on Malta would make it possible to compare the parochial qualities of libraries on Gozo with those on the mainland. The use of libraries by children was a theme that developed unexpectedly in this fieldwork since many librarians were keen to speak about younger borrowers. I think that future research with the ethical scope to observe and speak to children would make it possible to understand children's independent use of the library, how it features in their relationships with their parents and how it contributes to their learning of Maltese and English. Finally, the lack of available literature about public libraries in comparable small nations also imposed a limitation, meaning that future comparative work would be valuable.

Conclusion

Classic ethnographies of Malta have characterised it as parochial and detailed the importance of local organisations such as the church, the band club and the football club, to which Maltese people often feel a strong sense of loyalty (Boissevain 1993). This valuing of small, local activities is evidenced in the continued prevalence of village libraries, but it does not necessarily equate to enthusiastic usage of these libraries. While many librarians spoke of specific individuals or groups of individuals, such as mothers and children, for whom libraries remain important, my overall impression was of institutions that are to some extent stagnating. The library system on Gozo has been influenced, as a result of colonialism, by the public library system that grew up in Britain in the nineteenth century, with libraries gradually becoming accessible spaces that were deliberately intended to attract a cross-section of society. However, in the twenty-first century they show little evidence of actively attracting new members or diversifying their services and did not seem to draw many patrons.

Despite this, some librarians remained motivated to improve the décor of their libraries with the aim of improving public perceptions. Librarians were proud of their careful acquisition of stock that they knew would appeal to their borrowers and were conscious of the need to balance the provision of Maltese and English material, being particularly invested in the children who patronised their libraries. It was also evident from speaking to Gozitan librarians that many of them loved their jobs, believing that they were doing good and important work in their communities. I saw several examples of what could be characterised as 'best practice' among librarians, including consulting experienced staff about how to improve the borrowing experience, giving priority to upgrading the children's/teenage book stock in recognition of the important educational and social roles libraries can serve and working closely with local councils and primary schools to increase library funding and services. But regardless of the good intentions of some librarians, it seems that Gozo's decision to support many libraries to serve its small population mainly reflects the parochial Maltese tendency to have services available close to home, rather than widespread or enthusiastic patronage.

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