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A CULTURAL BRIDGE BETWEEN CENTURIES –
ERTUĞRUL GAZI COMMEMORATING CEREMONY
AND SÖĞÜT FESTIVAL

Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating ceremony and Söğüt Festival is a great example of sustainability of culture, tourism and recognition of old traditions. It has lasted over seven centuries; the 735th anniversary was held in 2016. It is celebrated annually on the second week of September in the Söğüt district of the city of Bilecik in Turkey. This festival is celebrated with spiritual purposes such as presenting the love and respect of the nomadic ‘Yoruk’ tribes to their fathers; teaching the love of the fatherland and history to young generations; memorising their history; and enhancing unity and solidarity between them.

It welcomes nomad tribes from all around Turkey and from other Turkic countries such as Kirgizstan. Every tribe pitches a hair tent to show their distinctive traditions, hand-crafts, foods, marital ceremonies, folk-dancing, and unique traditional garments. With this method, centuries old traditions become visual in the eye of the people from many different places. Therefore, these traditions do not lose their bonds with society. Nomads are still living in their own traditional ways. Their traditions are neither forgotten nor dying out. It is clear that the Festival helps the nomads to preserve their traditions for centuries. It offers them a platform to sustain their culture and communicate with other Nomads.

The Festival also hosts many unique events such as javelin throwing, call-and-response duet, a symposium about the Ottoman Empire, folk dancing, nomadic henna night, janissary band music, a commemoration ceremony, and a parade. It therefore promotes tourism at domestic and international levels.

This festival passes the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the nomads from generation to generation. Thus, it is an essential way to sustain the culture, including food, garments, old arts, special ceremonies, and even tribal values. In this paper we look at the Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival in a critical approach towards sustainable tourism.

Introduction

Historical and cultural heritage is essential for nations. This is because it represents the divergent features of each culture; it gives an identity and feelings of belonging to members of the nations. The Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival has an important role for sustaining this historical and cultural

heritage. This is also an important part of sustainable tourism which aims the best usage of ecological resources, respecting and conserving the culture of the host country and ensuring long term economic operations. In terms of sustainable tourism, this paper evaluates the Festival with its economic, social and ecological effects. It is pointed that it has a beneficial economic role for the locals as it is one of the major event in the town; it has been preserving or re-presenting their cultures for over 700 years; it also promotes tourism to the festival district. However, its ecological role can be improved as the Festival is not particularly sensitive for ecological effects of it. In the end, these features of the Festival show that it mostly satisfies the aims of sustainable tourism. With a better emphasis of the Festival, it is likely to see a festival which is fully compliant with the sustainable tourism criteria in future.

Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival

Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival is a traditional festival which is held in the Söğüt district of Bilecik during the second week of September every year by Yoruk tribes. “Yoruk” is the Anatolian name for people who have a nomadic living tradition, earn a livelihood from animal breeding, and live in seasonal tents. This festival has been celebrated for 736 years to commemorate Ertuğrul Gazi, who is the father of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman Gazi. At the same time, Kayi Boyu Yoruk tribes show their love and respect to their fathers, teach the history of their fatherland to young generations, enhance the unity and the solidarity of the community, and establish continuity to their traditions. This is the reason that this festival is also referred as “Yörük Festival”.

Ertuğrul Gazi gathered its tribe in a meeting called “Toy” to inform them about the works and share the pride of the acquired possessions when he is back from his winter quarter plateau. At these meetings, he served bulgur with meat to his guests. This tradition has been continued after his death and appears as part of the Yoruk Festival today. It is celebrated with the attendance of many Yoruk groups from many parts of the world. Every Yoruk tribe represents their folkloric dresses, food, handicrafts and culture in traditional hair tents.

The activities are done in the same order every years. The first day is chosen as Friday, which is considered as holy, to visit the shrine of Ertuğrul Gazi. Then, the preparation of the meat with cooked rice “Yoruk Pilaf”, which is believed to have healing properties, begins. A ceremony begins before Friday prayer in Çelebi Mehmet mosque for commemorating Ertuğrul Gazi and all other ancestors with praying and chanting. The traditional folk dance occurs as the last activity of the first day. On the second day, Yoruk tribes from all around Turkey and the world are

welcomed. Everybody walks with the traditional Ottoman Army Band known as the “Janissary Band” to the festival area. They visit the shrine of Ertuğrul Gazi on the second day all together. After that, traditional Yoruk Pilaf is served and every tribe in attendance is represented. A concert from the Janissary Band, folk dancing, javelin and archery competitions are done. For the dinner, everybody eats the healing rice together. The national march and standing in silence opens the last day of the festival. After the traditional folk dancing and Janissary Band concert, every tribe walks together in a parade. The Yoruk Pilaf is served for the last time and the festival ends.

Sustainable tourism

Sustainable Tourism is defined as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” by World Tourism Organisation (UNEP 2005). Social impacts in the definition refers to the impacts on the social environment and the local residents (Hall 2010) and the participation of the community in the management and cultural conservation is crucial for the purpose (Camilleri 2016). It is also important that visitors respect locals’ built and living cultural heritages and traditional values (UNEP 2005). Sustainable economic impacts on the other hand refer to long-term economic operations, bringing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders and providing stable employment and income-earning opportunities and contributing to the economy of the community by purchasing local products and using local services. Finally environmental impacts refer to the conservation and the protection of the natural resources, making optimal use of environmental resources.

Discussion – How sustainable is Söğüt Festival?

Söğüt Festival has been going on continuously for 736 years. In this section impacts of the festival are going to be analysed in three categories namely social impacts, economic impacts and ecological impacts.

In terms of social impacts, it can be said that Söğüt Festival has been a good example for a sustainable festival. Over centuries, the festival contributed into sustaining nomadic traditions and cultural heritage. In the festival, nomads represent their traditions, their food, their wedding and engagement customs, their folk dances, their handicrafts and etc. wearing their traditional clothes which helped them maintain all those for centuries. During the festival, local nomads also meet other nomads from other regions. Visitor nomads put up tents in the festival area and

spend their time there during the festival. This enables locals and visitors share and spread customs and traditions. Additionally, other visitors also get to know more about nomadic traditions during the festival. At the festival area traditions are represented and visitors have a chance to try and see how the nomads have been living. For example there are tents in which visitors can watch rug weaving or silverwork being done. The henna nights and the life styles of nomads are role played during the festival, and javelin (a sport) and archery are practised.

In terms of economic impacts, it is obvious that a three day festival could not have a direct link to reducing poverty. However, since it is one of the major events of the town with many visitors it has a great power which the economy as a whole can benefit (UNCTAD 2013). Over the years it has contributed to the town improving the quality of roads and by promoting the place it also helped to increase the number of tourists visiting the district. Additionally, new generations can be motivated to practise the traditional craft works. There are a few craftsmen doing the traditional handicrafts presented during the festival, but the popularity could be improved by having do-it-yourself workshops that teach the festivalgoers new skills. This may lead to newer job opportunities for the locals.

Until 1980s, the festival was held by the locals. They would organise and financially run the festival. However, lately it is financed by district governance, local municipality and the foundation of Ertuğrul Gazi Commemoration Ceremony and Söğüt Festival. Locals also financially contribute to the festival. When the festival was held by the locals, most of the jobs were voluntary, undertaken by the locals. However, nowadays professionals are hires as well as the locals. For example Yoruk Pilaf which is one of the festival remarks used to be prepared and cooked by the locals, however nowadays it is held by catering companies. By returning the job opportunities and the income of this cooking back into the town, the locals could benefit more from it.

In addition to those, there are travel agencies from nearby towns who organise tours to the festival. We believe the scope of the promotion could be widening to domestic and international travel agencies. This way the number of visitors might be increased.

Finally in terms of ecological impact, the festival could improve its impacts on the planet. The consumption of plastic is one of the issues for the festival. Water is being sold in plastic bottles at the festival area as well as the plastic cutlery distributed. Recycling could be a bigger part of the festival and some of the recycling process could start at the spot rather than later. For example, by installing recycling bins at the site, the amount of garbage headed for the landfill site could be minimised. Also as seen in other festivals such as in Calgary Folk Music Festival in Canada, the cigarette butts can be collected by volunteers at the spot. Additionally,

smoking areas in order to keep the cigarette butts at certain places can be designated (Calgary Folk Music Festival 2016).

Söğüt is located around 25 km away from other major towns therefore visitors use all means of transportation mostly their cars. By running shuttle buses from other towns to the festival area, the number of cars driven to the site can be decreased. Additionally, there is a bicycle tour organised for the festival. This initiative may motivate individuals for cycling to the festival. And in the future there may be more cyclists visiting the festival.

Additionally awareness on the subject of ecological sustainability can be raised. Nomads lived an ecologically friendly lifestyle over centuries. Therefore there may be inspiring speakers who aim to motivate and inform the visitors on how to continue to live sustainable lives once they leave the festival in their own daily lives.

Conclusion and recommendations

Festivals help nations sustain their social and cultural values and pass those to new generations. Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival is a great example of sustainability of culture, tourism and recognition of old traditions. It has lasted over seven centuries. The festival passes the cultural heritage of the nomads from generation to generation. Thus, it is an essential way to sustain the culture, including food, garments, old arts, handicrafts, special ceremonies, and even tribal values.

The festival has social, economic and ecological impacts. In this paper we have discussed all three types of impacts and suggested some solutions in order for it to have a more positive impact. In terms of social impacts, the festival has been sustainable over years. It helped nomads pass their traditions and cultural heritage to new generations over centuries. In terms of economic impacts, certain things could be improved such as promoting the festival on a larger scale, popularising the traditional craft works and sports thus creating job opportunities. And finally, in terms of ecological impacts, although the nomadic life style is a good example of a green lifestyle the festival is not very green. The use of plastic and the lack of recycling at the festival area are the main issues. By looking at other festivals, a more sustainable approach can be followed such as recycling at the site, using reusable cutlery and glasses and encouraging people to cycle or take the shuttle buses rather than their cars.

It is also important to know that “sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them” (UNEP 2005). Söğüt Festival has survived over 736 years and it helped nomads preserve their cultural heritage and traditions. It keeps

attracting all the nations all over the world and provides them a high level of satisfaction. With a greener approach we believe that Ertuğrul Gazi Commemorating Ceremony and Söğüt Festival will go on helping nomads preserve their culture and traditions as well as enlightening new generations about their fathers and inspiring them.

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