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Negotiating Heritage:

Olive Cultivation in a Transforming Rural Landscape

Olive cultivation, a dominant agricultural activity along the Mediterranean coast, has profoundly shaped the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of rural life in the region for centuries. Traditional knowledge, practices, and methods related to olive cultivation in Turkey were included in UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage requiring urgent safeguarding in 2023 (UNESCO, 2023).

The Karaburun Peninsula is a unique region, distinguished by its specific 'hurma' olive (Olea europaea L.) variety (Özen, Baysal, & Tokatlı, 2013). This particular olive is remarkable for its spontaneous 'debittering' process, wherein it loses its inherent bitter taste and becomes edible directly on the tree. This rare phenomenon contributes to the olive's unique appeal and its successful thriving within a distinctive ecological niche. Olive cultivation has been the primary source of livelihood for the region’s inhabitants for centuries.

The Karaburun Peninsula, historically an agricultural region, has undergone significant demographic change in recent years (Izmir Development Agency, 2014; Endeksa, 2024). Once economically disadvantaged, the region has now transformed into an attractive destination for newly arriving urban elites of higher socio-economic standing. While this change has reshaped the economic structure and social fabric of the peninsula, it has also diversified perceptions of olive cultivation. The transformation of the Karaburun Peninsula will be analysed through the lens of critical heritage studies (Winter, 2013).

Olive cultivation is perceived differently by various groups within the peninsula—local inhabitants, new settlers, tourists, investors, and academics. For long-term residents, olive cultivation represents an integral part of their culture and a continuous source of livelihood. In contrast, some outsiders primarily see these olive groves as lucrative real estate ventures, valuing the land for its development potential and the rent value it can generate, even if it entails replacing the traditional olive cultivation. This new economic outlook has also incrementally influenced local landowners, leading some to consider selling their olive groves for quick

financial gain over continued agricultural production. Lastly, scholars analyse the area from a conservation perspective, a viewpoint often disconnected from the experiences and priorities of local residents.

Building on this multi-faceted perspective, this study combines the analytical lens of conservation practices with examination of social identities and changing power relations. This integrated approach demonstrates that heritage is not a fixed value, but rather a dynamic and evolving process (Atkinson, 2016: 385; Fouseki, 2022: 218) profoundly shaped by the diverse perspectives and contestations of different actors.

This study employs a qualitative methodology to understand the evolving perceptions of olive cultivation within the Karaburun Peninsula, particularly under conditions of demographic and economic transformation. The research is designed to reveal how heritage is shaped and reinterpreted in different social contexts. It specifically questions not only what heritage is, but also for whom and under what conditions these meanings are produced.

Primary data collection involved participant observation and in-depth interviews with diverse groups in the peninsula, including long-term residents, new settlers, and olive producers. Focus group discussions were conducted to explore social structures and relations surrounding olive cultivation. On-site observations documented production processes and visible economic impacts of the transformation.

Data were thematically analyzed to identify key themes reflecting how migration and economic pressures affect traditional olive oil production and the socio-economic structure. This analysis highlights the shifting meanings of olive cultivation heritage as understood by different social groups, illustrating heritage as a dynamic process influenced by historical, economic, and cultural dynamics.

The field visits conducted from July to October 2024, deliberately chosen to coincide with intensified harvesting and production activities. During this period, we visited the Karaburun Peninsula's center and 14 villages, where we observed production practices and festivals. We conducted initial interviews, engaging 5–6 participants on average per village. These interviews included village headmen/mukhtar, local farmers, and newcomers. In November and December, we conducted 20 detailed interviews focused specifically on four villages displaying unique perspectives: Sarpıncık, Eğlenhoca, İnecik, and Parlak.

Sarpıncık, located in the northern part of the peninsula, exemplifies a community where olive cultivation persists amidst intensive out-migration. Eğlenhoca, recognized as the southern peninsula's production hub, is characterized by its agricultural festivals and significant in-migration. İnecik has emerged as a favoured settlement for the well-educated, notably hosting an "olive school" that attracts academics and artists for their work. Parlak is home to the region's largest olive processing factory and is experiencing considerable migration in its village and surrounding areas.

Ongoing in-depth interviews are being conducted with long-term residents, recent arrivals from urban centers, tourists, and individuals who have migrated from the peninsula to cities, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of diverse perspectives.

These initial insights revealed a clear conflict between the local population and newcomers/outsiders, primarily centered around perceptions of olive groves.

During the interviews, participants were asked to define "olives." Local residents consistently described olive groves as "a part of our life" and "our tradition," emphasizing the entire cultivation process from care to harvest. In contrast, newcomers defined them as "the natural landscape of the region" and "a common tree species in the region." Newcomers' understanding of olive heritage also extended to olive oil, olive oil dishes, and olive-themed artwork, showcasing a more product- and consumption-oriented view. Despite these differing perspectives, both groups largely agreed that olive land in the region is shrinking, cultivation is in decline, and protection is needed.

However, a key divergence emerged: local people perceive the change in ownership of olive groves as the primary threat to their heritage, largely driven by economic pressures on local producers. Fieldwork revealed that local residents continue to actively participate in cultivation rituals, such as harvesting and festivals, defining these as fundamental to their way of life. Conversely, migrants rarely partake in these activities, typically observing or consuming. Furthermore, interviewees from the local community were generally willing and supportive of conservation efforts. In contrast, newcomers largely refused being interviewed and refrained from expressing opinions on conservation, indicating a lack of engagement or hiding their exploitative interests.

The most significant threat to the local culture, as perceived by villagers, stems from changes in olive grove ownership. This concern is rooted in the observation that newcomers typically do not engage in traditional olive production rituals and often favour industrial methods over

established practices. This distinction strongly suggests that while locals view heritage as an active, lived practice, newcomers tend to perceive it as a commodified entity, ready for consumption.

This dynamic aligns with broader patterns of gentrification, where cultural and spatial resources are re-valued and marketed, often stripping them of their original meanings and traditional bearers. Within this neoliberal mind-set, the concept of heritage increasingly transforms into an investment opportunity. Consequently, the gentrification process in the Karaburun Peninsula is not merely an economic shift; it actively devalues local production knowledge and triggers a profound restructuring of cultural meaning, transforming a way of life into a marketable asset.

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