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Fate of Turkish Traditional Crafts:

A Case of Economic, Legal and Political Marginalisation

Introduction

Traditional handcrafts have been going through a somehow familiar historical course in Turkey: Through the establishment phase of the nation-state, from mid-1920's, the new republic had a strong claim on the concept of traditional crafts as a cultural legacy, a constitutive element of the to-be-constructed national identity for about three decades. Exhibitions, ethnographic museums, academic studies were common practices employed to reinforce the nationalist idea of a continuous and noble craft tradition as a proof of the existence of the national culture. However, the same process of republican development also aimed to create an industrial society. The radical change in production and distribution processes with succeeding introduction of industrialization, state capitalism, corporate capitalism and free-market economy not only made it impossible to sustain the craft practice as the dominant mode of production, but also transformed the cultural meaning of crafts. Today, many practitioners either complain about the lack of official support from the state, and consider quitting the practice because of monetary problems, or switch to a so-called degenerate mode of craft production, that is, for cultural tourism.

Many research studies have been conducted in Turkey aiming to document the transformation of Turkish crafts throughout the 20th century and to propose methods for intervention. A brief review of such literature reveals two dominant streams in positioning crafts within contemporary economical, political and cultural conditions. In the first approach, which can be called the 'cultural-conservative approach', crafts are considered as genuinely national and cultural artifacts, which have recently been abandoned to degeneration, even extinction, by the impact of modernity, industrialisation, neo-liberal economy and tourism. The second approach, namely, the 'economic-reformist approach', claims that production and marketing of crafts should be reformed and integrated in the contemporary economic conditions in order to survive. Utilising the tension between conservation (with its nostalgic or conservative references to an original past) and reformation (with its reference to the global economic context), this paper attempts to map the way in which crafts are conceptualised in Turkish academy, and how the recent economic transformations and the changes they bring about fit in this mapping.

To observe these transformations on field, the paper includes a partial case study, representing a qualitative research approach through literature reviews, interviews with selected role-players, and observations. A field trip was held to Amasya, a city in Anatolia undergoing touristic transformation, including interviews with government figures and local craftsmen and manufacturers. These were accompanied by visits to local workshops, city museums and crafts markets. The impact of local branding policies (with their objectives to boost tourism output of localities) on crafts practices were explored with an eye to understanding how economic transformations influence the general conditions of sustainability of crafts production in Turkey. Due to the nature of the study, detailed conclusions are not possible, but the study highlights some policy-relevant implications that should be considered in the future.

Since the general concept of sustainability is scarcely figured in laws and legislations of the “developing” economy of Turkey, considerations of traditional craft has never been discussed in terms of the sustainable development. The sustainability issue enters the crafts agenda just in the mean of impossibility to sustain craft production without referring to a shallow understanding of local cultural souvenirs. Exploring the legal, economic and political processes involved, the paper comments on the currently economically unsustainable condition of traditional crafts in Turkey. The paper, therefore, addresses the cultural aspect of sustainability and emphasise the detrimental effects of the current situation on sustainable development in general – for the fall of crafts also means losing their indispensable contributions to the project of sustainability, like customary manufacturing methods, local production and use of natural materials.

The contemporary problems before the sustainability of crafts production

Many studies on the traditional crafts in Turkey have a pessimistic tone: The number of artisans has dramatically declined, a new generation of producers cannot be trained due to the highly limited market; thus, craft production has become almost impossible in the contemporary conditions surrounding it. These are accompanied by official reports on local craft production in various regions of Turkey, which reveal that many forms of crafts have been at the brink of extinction for some time now, if not already completely disappeared (Kilinc 2004).

In response to this, some writers have claimed that the golden age of traditional craft production was the Ottoman era, since there were then many professional organisations, unions, and a well-functioning system for training new generations of artisans. The reason why craft production became less and less important in both economic and cultural terms, according to these studies, was the Westernisation route selected by the young Turkish Republic, which strived to transform itself into an industrial society after the Western nations by mimicking their model of development. The grand transformations the new republic introduced are considered to have led to the fast and cheap industrial production of artefacts previously produced by craftspeople, eventually damaging the status of crafts production. (Altuntas 1994: 1-2; Ozturk 2003: 9-12)

Such a change in the production system may seem to be the reason undermining crafts, however, the very same authority accelerating industrial production also developed a cultural policy for the young modern nation state, which had a strong claim on the cultural heritage, including the traditional craft production. Handcraft production all over Anatolia was included in the nation-building procedure, as the material-cultural part of a newly constructed national identity; it was invented as a tradition, and then added to the repertoire of authentic traditional practices. Much research was conducted, exhibitions prepared, museums founded, catalogues published by the official authority in the three decades following the establishment of Turkish Republic in mid-1920s

However, the symbolic importance attributed to crafts could not prevent them from losing market, being unable to compete mass produced cost-effective goods. Developing industry and the free-market economy made it almost impossible to consume and use craft products in daily life. On the contrary, the process made crafts lose their traditional use-value and transformed them into symbolic goods exchanged solely for their ethno-cultural significations in accordance with touristic purposes. Tourism, having an upward trend especially after 1960s, completed the transformation of handcrafts into souvenirs (Altuntas 1994: 1-2; Ozturk 2003: 11).

This brief narrative of economical change and its impact on the social role and economic status of crafts is more-or-less common throughout the literature. However, from this point on, one can observe that the literature divides into two distinct camps. While one

group of writers prefer to view this process of transformation as a deterioration of authentic values and calls the state or the civil society to action for the preservation of handcrafts, the other argues for a reformation in crafts practice which would integrate it to the capitalist market. This paper names the first as the 'cultural-conservative approach', and the second, the 'economic-reformist approach'.

The cultural-conservative approach towards the transformation of crafts

To iterate, having lost its role both within social life and among other economic processes, contemporary crafts practice has found itself a place in tourism practice by manufacturing souvenirs. This has resulted in a dramatic change in the way crafts is practiced. As already noted, the conservative approach tends to label this process of change as one of 'degeneration', both in technical, artistic and marketing terms. This is basically because, having lost their use-value, it is no longer necessary for crafts products to be manufactured out of high-quality materials as it was in their originals or to be well-crafted (Arlı 1994, 20). It is, on the contrary, more important for a souvenir to create 'added value' in marketing terms by making a symbolic reference to a locality.

Another issue put forward by the proponents of the approach is regarding the relationship of contemporary crafts to the Turkish national culture. Either in the process of extinction or already extinct, today's crafts products are, supposedly, inauthentic, if not outright forgery, and thus not appropriate for the originality of Turkish handcrafts. The perpetrators behind all this degeneration, deterioration and arabesque-isation of Turkish national crafts practice are the advanced techniques, changing needs and the very idea of modernity (Ozturk 2003: 117).

The suggestions developed by those who name this process of degeneration and take the conservative stance against it are, however, mostly superficial propositions that do not take the socio-economic context into consideration. For example, Gurler (1994, 193) bestows the craftspeople of today with the mission to preserve and deliver the crafts heritage. Ozturk (2003: 117), on the other hand, calls for an adoption of Turkish cultural values by both producers and consumers, in order to spread the best examples of Turkish crafts in domestic and international markets.

To conclude, in this approach, crafts are mainly considered to be cultural entities, which should have been conserved and continued through legal and financial subvention by the state, as they were in the first decades of nation-state. Accordingly, this approach can be considered a continuation of, or at least articulated to, the politics of national identity mentioned above. The national identity that was invented and nurtured by the state from the early 20th century on is, in the last analysis, where the intrinsic value of crafts products stems from: it is in reference to such a source of 'cultural' value that crafts practice is placed in opposition to the deteriorating influence of, first, industrialisation, then, tourism practices. Finally, the idea that handcrafts has been either left to degeneration into touristic artefacts, or confined to ethnography museums, has a mourning tone, which indeed acknowledges the impossibility of the subvention hope.

The socio-economic conditions of the transformation of crafts products into souvenirs

Yet, the conditions of transformation cannot be reduced to degenerated cultural politics, nor can the contemporary conditions of crafts be healed through moralistic proposals. Instead, the transformation summarised above should be located in a wider picture of the economic and political transformation that Turkey has been going through since the

1980s, together with both its macro, or global, context and micro, or local, manifestations, i.e., how things go in the local in terms of crafts production, distribution and consumption.

Turkish economy, as in many other underdeveloped countries, was motivated by national development idea until 1980s, when World Bank' policies of interruptions on funds, and introduction to global free market. Integration to global markets necessitated many grand regulations such as privatization of basic public services (i.e. energy, health education, etc.), and state quitting many financial and productive sectors. One specific aspect of this process, which helps us understand the issue at hand, is the reconstruction of local governments. Project-based local public administration filled in the previous principles of central government, which used to have a claim of comprehensive approach to the planning of socio-economic structure. The authority of decision on cultural and economic processes was transferred partially to non-governmental organizations and private enterprise (Guler 2005: 16-20).

There seems to be no place for crafts in the cultural-economic policies of neo-liberal governments. Decentred economic tendencies of contemporary neo-liberal political economy, and free-market results in the handover of once economic and cultural responsibilities to local governance and private sector, both of which seem to be based on economic competitiveness. Each local unit, such as regions, provinces, municipalities are determining some cultural/symbolic elements, selectively identified in the local history, tradition, nature or culture, to construct a cultural narrative, which can and should be translated into financial profit.

Besides being concerned about the survival of local crafts and their utilisation towards tourism profits, officials interviewed in Amasya routinely hinted at their expectation that private sector, NGOs or research programs at universities will take over their former role as the benefactor of crafts. This is obviously not peculiar to Amasya, though. All over Turkey, the survival of crafts practice depends on either European Union projects or private business enterprise. These, eventually, can be considered as the clues for state policies of leaving the craft issue in economic, cultural and political terms.

The economic-reformist approach towards the transformation of crafts

Here enters the second approach to the crafts problem, i.e. economic-reformist approach. This approach differs from the cultural conservative approach in proposing improvement in the production, distribution and consumption processes of crafts. Design and marketing should be invited in the entire process, so that crafts would again catch the upward trend in economy. The production processes should be revised with a broad mind, including the technological opportunities both in production and education processes. Such reformist approach, however, joins the former approach in aiming at the preservation of traditional structures and the authenticity and artistic quality of crafts products (Arkis and Aydin 1999: 57-58).

Such context is explanatory for what is happening in many villages, cities, regions in Turkey. With the support of European Union, many cities are developing branding projects for the whole village, city or region. Crafts in collaboration with tourism seems to be the only formula to provide sustainability of craft production, and protection of the immanent cultural values attributed to traditional crafts. Companies and entrepreneurs are seeking for ways to employ craft products in trade.

The conservative critique of tourism is justified in some of its conclusions: Marketing crafts for tourism necessitates some sort of simplified and normalised translation of both the signs and symbols on the artifacts and objects, and the cultural experience as a

whole into a minimum ground where both the cultural entity and the consumer subject can meet (Richards 1999b). Yet, this cultural bridge can only be constructed at the expense of loss of originality in the artifacts. As a matter of fact, from a design point of view, souvenirs handcrafted in small workshops, and during public craft courses without any professional consultancy, can easily be identified as banal repetitions of simple formulas. These formulas, or aesthetic shortcuts, are mostly various uses of local symbols (such as the apple of Amasya, or the Safranbolu house), their abstractions and reproductions on many daily artifacts (such as magnets, or key rings with photo-prints or paintings of local symbols).

Such are the shallowest applications of staged-authenticity. The touristic experience, aiming to charm the tourist has to be domesticated, and all the pseudo-authentic-local experience is transferred into a legible and digestible souvenirs, marketing objects. The colours of the objects can be changed to fit the "modern taste", and even further modifications in form and function of a traditional craft object (Richards 1999a).

Two Amasian crafts products: Bardak and Samovar

The case study of Amasya has been much informing in this regard since it is a city where many civilizations had lived on 7500 years of historical inheritance. It has much important cultural wealth and looks like an open-air museum that one can easily meet the prints of civilizations in order Hittite, Kimmer, Iskit, Med, Persian, Pontus, Rome, Byzantium, Seljuk and Ottomans. Although it makes difficult to label them national, local crafts of Amasya region such as carpet and kilim weaving, waistcloth and bed sheet weaving, needle embroidery, rope spinning, blacksmithing, tin samovar production and the wood arts reflect a blend of the past and the present cultures. Having been a rich location in terms of such crafts in the past, Amasya's contemporary picture reveals the dramatic state of the change and thus becomes a demonstrative example for the conditions of crafts today.

Translated into designerly terms, the two positions in the literature discussed above is based on two different answers to the question of preservation versus reformation: If the answer is the former one, it can be realised only by research and documentation. If it is the latter one, one or more of betterment, redesign, diversification and creation modes of intervention would have to be applied.

Amasya samovar is the example to those who are in favour of reforming crafts. Samovar is a metal urn for brewing tea, often of brass, and known to be a Russian invention. Just like Amasya in Turkey, Tula is a Russian city famous for its samovars. Samovar making in Tula dates back to 1778. Today Tula samovars carrying features of each decade were preserved and presented in the Tula Museum of Samovars. In contrast to Tula samovars, there is no documentation about Amasya samovars. It is known that since the beginning of 19th century samovar has been used widely in Anatolia, however, there is little information on the use and period features of it.

During the field trip in Amasya, the writers of the present paper had the chance to see the ethnography collection of Amasya Museum, where the local craft practice of the past was represented in rooms and displays by display figures dressed as old craftsmen posed as practicing many crafts. Samovar and bardak maker craftsman figures can easily make the audience think of the practice as being both historic and touristic one. One can see far less than satisfactory amount of documentary and historical information on the craft techniques, materials, and culture at the corners of such displays.

Today samovar makers in Amasya state that it is a recent handicraft in Amasya. Most of the artisans who were familiar with brass and stove making had to develop tin samovars to cope with the competitors in the local market they developed tin samovars. [Figure 1]

The president of Samovar Artisans Guild in Amasya reported that their craft is subject to the danger of perishing due to rising demand of consumers to electric samovars. [Figure 2] Traditional samovars heated with coal or charcoal. That is why consumers prefer easy to use, easy to clean electric samovars rather than to cope with ash and smoke of the coal.



Figure 1. Amasya tin samovar
(photo by Senem Ozyurek)



Figure 2. Electric samovar
(producer: Karaca Co., Turkey)

Besides traditional samovars common in the Amasya houses, a recent invention of Amesian artisans, 'giant samovar' is being used by tea-houses and big hotels in and out of the Amasya region [Figure 3]. So, this reformation of the samovar with marketing concerns can be considered as success of both touristic-symbolic manoeuvre the crafts are generally tending towards, and that of sustaining the samovar as a widely used functional object. However, such reformed and limited use cannot compensate the dramatic decline of common marketing and use of samovar in its original scale and context in daily life.



Figure 3. Chairperson of Amasya Samovar Artisans Guild with giant samovar
(photo by Osman Sisman)

In the final analysis, this is obviously a drawback in terms of sustainable development. Replacement of samovars and samovar-making with electric samovars and factory-level mass production can only result in the termination of the samovar crafts altogether, which would mean that local production gives away to globalised mass production, sustainable materials to plastics and the proletarianisation of craftspeople. It is also visible that authorities, despite their personal concerns about the matter, are helpless at the policy level which favors the handing over of cultural stuff to private enterprise.

"Amasya bardagi" is a wooden liquid container used as a thermos bottle by peasants of Amasya in the past. [Figure 4] Just like many other crafts "Amasya bardagi" production had become an intangible cultural heritage. One of the few bardak artisans left in Amasya is not hopeful about the future. [Figure 4]. The local governors from Amasya Municipality motivated, and later commissioned him to produce the touristic souvenir versions of the item, however, they also ordered him to carve some scenes and symbols on it for such cultural consumption. What is the function of this ornament on the item? Richards (1999a), asserts that artisanship, and local production should be overemphasised, somehow 'staged' on the handcrafted products, if the tourist consumption is targeted. Bagli (2001) seems to agree when she claims that also material is emphasised in such products. In both cases, the object solely becomes an over-authenticated surface carved and encrypted by simplified, legible touristic symbols; and hence, this emphasis and authenticity aims result in a fake display of cultural elements.



Figure 4. Bardak of Amasya
(photo by Senem Ozyurek)



Figure 5. Last artisan of "bardak", Ali Doruk.
(photo by Senem Ozyurek)

Thus the "bardak" faces extinction if not conserved or reformed. The reformation attempt, even when done to conserve the cultural value that 'bardak' is, changes both the object itself and its mode of production and consumption. This, in turn, brings the sustainability question back, since all that is valued for a project of sustainability is lost in the process.

Although the legal agenda of Turkey seems to be ignorant of local crafts, gradually abandoning the cultural-missionary position of the state, the UNESCO definition for 'cultural legacy' leaves room for crafts in the area of "intangible cultural heritage", finding itself a place in legal arrangements for tourism. For instance, in the *Final Report of Protection of South Eastern Turkish Cultural Heritage, and Development of Tourism* (2005), such definition is referred always with the strongest emphasis on the touristic

and economic potential of craft production; not as a distinct cultural element to be protected and documented in the name of history, in an academic or official fashion.

Conclusion

Neither the cultural conservative approach, nor the economic reformist approach seem to support crafts in the process of ceasing to exist, since the former is mourning for the national-state cultural politics, which is an exclusive and limited approach impossible to be employed in contemporary politics; and the latter proposing a transformation into statuettes carved as touristic symbols.

The patient reader obviously has the right to ask what all of these has to do with sustainability. After reviewing the special case of crafts in Amasya, supported by the theoretical accounts on the political and cultural implications of contemporary economy, the wider picture would be taken as a strong claim on the un-sustainability of craft production as it was. It has to be transformed into weak, mutated elements of cultural tourism and symbolic consumption, and cannot remain as production and use of functional items of everyday use.

Importance attributed to local material and professional resources in accounts of sustainability thus becomes radically limited, if not almost impossible; and crafts become the elements of niche marketing. This fact should be considered as a starting point for a far wider discussion of sustainability as conditioned by political economy, not as an isolated, independent wish statement on the use of materials and resources. As it is obvious in the above discussion, without the legal regulations of cultural politics, and without a comprehensive approach on the level of government, craft production has to adapt itself to the rules of the market.

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