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The Rebirth of Alacati (Cesme) through Tourism: How Has the Old Village Turned into a Favourite Tourism Destination?

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Abstract

Alacati, located in the west part of Izmir, stands out with the drastic diversification in its main economic activities experienced in the form of transition from agriculture to tourism during the 2000s in parallel to the recent changes that have taken place in tourism sector as well as in national policies. However, recent developments that have taken place in the historical pattern such as the commercialisation of public spaces through elite tourism, implied different economic and social outcomes for the members of community. This paper mainly attempts to determine the strategies and motives underlying the rise of the old village as a popular destination. Through focusing on the expectations and concerns of stakeholders existing in the settlement, it seeks to draw attention to the importance of developing a sustainable tourism management that emphasizes long-term benefits of the community members and enables the participation of all the stakeholders in the policy formulation and decision making processes.

***Key Words:** Elite tourism, historical pattern, externalizing effects on local people, Alacati.*

Introduction

Tourism activity, as with any type of economic development, brings about changes for the economic, social, cultural, and spatial structure of settlements. It is mostly regarded for regenerating income and employment, encouraging the entrepreneurial activity and eventually leading to improvements in the economic structure of the region (Vanhove, 2005). However according to some, economic benefits are illusory since much of the generated employment is seasonal, unskilled and low-paid, and economic gains mostly go to the outside investors. There is also a concern that it creates nations of waiters and maids, and affects the community's traditional work patterns resulting in the abandonment of agricultural activity (Greenwood, 1982; Ratz, 2000). As regards to enhancements in historical urban areas through the restoration and conservation of dilapidated buildings, spatial impacts of tourism are mostly regarded as positive, while social and cultural impacts are usually considered as negative resulting in the loss of traditional lifestyles, relocation of residents, alienation, and so on.

Alacati, located in the west part of Izmir, in Cesme peninsula, has faced a drastic diversification in its main economic activities by the early 2000s, during when the natural and historical characteristics of the settlement were explored and integrated into a tourism-based development (Figure 1). In this period, the success achieved in a very short time by a few small hotels and restaurants opened in the settlement has attracted the subsequent investments and in parallel to changes that have taken place in the classical tourism understanding simply based on sea-sun-sand as well as in tourist expectations, Alacati has become a favourite tourism destination for a group of tourists that seek for qualified, small-scaled and unexplored spaces and experiences. However, recent developments in the historical pattern and coastal area have brought about several threats for the sustainability of tourism sector. The basic threat has been the externalizing impact of '*elite tourism*', which targets the high-income visitors, on local people. As a matter of fact, local people, who experience difficulties in integrating with the prevailing tourism activity in their settlement either as investors or users, tend to sell their houses and leave their settlement to new residents.

Figure 1. View from Cesme peninsula (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007)

This paper mainly attempts to determine through which strategies and motives the old village of the past has become a popular tourism destination. Following brief background information in historical context, the paper focuses on the rebirth of the settlement with the adoption of tourism as an economic development strategy and outlines the recent developments that took place particularly in the historical core. Through highlighting the expectations and concerns of different stakeholders existing in the settlement, the paper seeks to draw attention to the importance of developing a sustainable tourism management that emphasizes long-term benefits of the community members and enables the participation of all the stakeholders in the policy formulation and decision making processes.

From Agrilia to Alacati...An Overview of the Past

In the antiquity period, the region where the settlement located was named as Ionia, a great civilization that pioneered the world not only in science and philosophy but also in architecture and sculpture. As cited by historians such as Herodotus, Ionian cities were known to be effective in the birth of Byzantine art and showed significant improvements in urbanism as well during the Roman period. Alacati, which was located close to four Ionian cities – *Erythrai, Klazomenai, Teos* and *Chios* – and known as *Agrilia* in those times has undoubtedly been affected by this civilization (Atilla and Ozturk, 2006).

Alacati has first faced migration phenomenon in the early nineteenth century when the Greek population in Chios were invited to the town to be employed in the drainage of marshland that covered the south part. The marshland was drained through the construction of a canal that reached the natural harbour. This canal was then transformed into a harbour and the new settlement was constructed in two kilometres north of this harbour by the Greek workers. Soon these people, by hiring the vast fields of Turkish population living in the region, have improved viniculture and the quality of wine made by these grapes caused the settlement become famous worldwide. The population reached 13000 by the early nineteenth century, 80 percent of which consisted of Greek population (Atilla and Ozturk, 2006). The dominance of Greek population and the togetherness of two different nations in the same geography inevitably had reflections on the spatial formation of the settlement as well as on the economic structure. During this period, the settlement had an increasing economic welfare due to the success achieved in viniculture and wine making.

In the early twentieth century, the settlement faced the second notable migration movement in its history, impacts of which were felt drastically in the succeeding years. During the peace negotiations in Lausanne, a convention was signed between Turkey and Greece on January, 1923. On the basis of this convention, Moslem population living in Macedonia and Greek Orthodox population living in Central Anatolia had been subject to a compulsory migration process. Accordingly, the Greek Orthodox residents living in Alacati for nearly a century were replaced by the Moslem population living in different regions of Greece. “In fact, it was not only the exchange of population but also the exchange of cultures and life practices

eventually leading to a new economic restructuring and spatial pattern in Alacati” (Dalgakiran and Bal, 2007, p.406).

The exchange of population brought about drastic social and economic transformations. The new citizens of the settlement, who were coming from a rural background, lacked the necessary information about the most suitable economic/agricultural activity for the region and hence engaged in tobacco growing as the most familiar agricultural activity during the years between 1924 and 1980. Beginning from the 1980s, the settlement has gone into a long-term stagnation period as tobacco growing had a highly limited economic return due to state policies and during this period most of the young generation had to leave the town for occupational reasons. According to some, the declining economy of the town during 1980s and 1990s implied an opportunity in the conservation of built environment by preventing the construction of new buildings particularly in the historical core which then served as the main potential during the economic restructuring of the city based on tourism activity. The exchange of population surprisingly caused a cultural richness which had reflections on the built environment. Today, it is possible to trace the togetherness of different historical strata in the spatial pattern of the settlement which significantly contributes to its unique identity. As Caserta and Russo argue (2001), the cultural assets inherited from the past are irreproducible and highly specific to the local historical context and culture and identity. Therefore, there is wide acceptance that the stone houses and narrow streets, displaying the combination of Greek and Turkish architecture specifically in the core area, have an important role in the settlement’s recently gained tourism popularity.

Rebirth in the Axis of Tourism – A Story of Success

The development of tourism industry in Alacati by the 2000s should be evaluated within the context of the changed values and lifestyles in the society, which are represented by a growing consciousness of nature, a search for the real, authentic and greater quality, a tendency in experiencing the inexperienced and gaining impressions of new cultures. Additionally, attraction of the countryside, quiet holidays with content, and holidays devoted to sports, nature, health, culture, and other hobbies have recently been the predominant trends in the tourism industry (Vanhove, 2005). Growing demand for more flexible and individualized tourism products accompanied with the post-modern tourist quest to find the unspoilt and the

authentic have caused a policy shift away from large-scale resort development towards stimulation of small-scale entrepreneurial activity (Richards and Hall, 2000; Ratz, 2000).

In parallel to the emerging trends in the expectations of tourists, Alacati has experienced a shift in its main economic activity by the early 2000s and became a favourite destination for tourists that seek for qualified, small-scaled, unexplored spaces and experiences. Essentially, the initial signs of the functional diversification in economic structure have become evident in 1990s with the introduction of windsurfing activity. Depending on the natural characteristics of the coastal area, Alacati soon became one of the foremost windsurfing centres of the world where many windsurfing events and contests take place at both national and international levels. In parallel to changing trends in holiday concept and incentives given to construction sector, the town has been subject to new construction facilities in the form of secondary homes. During this period residential units, architectural and spatial patterns of which were completely inharmonious with the characteristics of the traditional pattern, were constructed particularly in the north part of the conservation area.

The togetherness of unique architectural pattern existing in the historical core formed by different historical strata and the natural features of the coastal area that enable the windsurfing activities has undoubtedly been the determining factor in the rebirth of Alacati through tourism. The success achieved in a very short time by a boutique hotel and two restaurants opened in the settlement in 2001 has attracted the succeeding investments. By the end of 2007, 39 small hotels, each having 5 to 10 rooms and numerous café and restaurants exist in the settlement providing elegant accommodation and dining facilities (Turizm Haberleri, 2007). As a result of the increased demand of high-paying, selective tourists in the historical core, houses and even the storages have been integrating into tourism industry one after another as small hotels and/or restaurants. At present, it has been seen that the majority of tourism investments concentrate in the historical core, which has officially been declared as urban site (Figures 2 and 3).

Figures 2-3. Views from the historical centre of Alacati (Photos taken by A. Dalgakiran)

Stakeholders, Expectations and Concerns

It is not surprising that in a settlement that has risen as a favourite tourist destination following a long-period of stagnation process, there exists a number of stakeholders such as central government, local government, investors, property owners, local people and non-governmental organisations, each having expectations and/or concerns relating the long-term economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts of the tourism sector. Essentially, interests of different groups in the society usually do not tend to coincide as these groups do not benefit equally from tourism development (Richards and Hall, 2000). In the case of Alacati, while the increased popularity of the settlement is welcomed and encouraged by the central and local governments, investors and property owners with respect to its positive economic impacts, there is a growing concern among the local people and several non-governmental organisations due to its negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts. It will be appropriate to clarify the potential expectations and concerns of stakeholders relating the future development of tourism in Alacati.

Central government is probably the most effective stakeholder among the others as it holds the central planning authority which enables the manipulation of rent mechanisms in a region through large-scaled planning policies. Following the declaration of Cesme as one of the six 'Tourism Cities' (a new definition allowing for the allocation of public properties to tourism investments) countrywide, a plan was developed for Cesme peninsula covering an area of 10200 hectares. 'Cesme-Alacati-Pasalimani Culture Tourism Conservation and Development Regions Plan' (scaled as 1/25000), which was developed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and which envisaged significant bed capacities and additional population, has been subject to substantial criticisms. With the increased building density and bed capacity in the coastal area and population, the basic concern is that the plan will harm the small-scaled and

authentic characteristic of the region eventually leading to a similarity with Antalya or Bodrum, as two typical cases that suffer from large-scaled, mass tourism.

Local government stands out as one of the stakeholders that has envisaged a vision as making Alacati a ‘worldwide brand’ through surf, golf and thermal tourism. In realising this vision, local government has spent successful efforts such as setting the country’s first wind power plant through a partnership with a private company in 1998, expanding the borders of officially declared urban site, completing the conservation plan in 2006, developing several marketing strategies for commercial uses operating in the conservation area, preventing the construction of multi-storey buildings through by-laws, and encouraging various cultural activities to take place in the settlement such as art galleries, ceramic workshops and classical music concerts.

In contributing to tourism popularity of the settlement, local government also contributed to the development of a flagship project in the coastal area, named as Port Alacati, main concept of which has been the construction of residential, commercial, tourism, sports and cultural facilities on a 236 hectare land by drawing the sea inwards through the canals. Although the project has been subject to considerable criticisms and oppositions by environmentalist organisations as damaging the ecosystem, it is strongly supported by the local government - as being one of the partners - as “a new living environment’. In this sense, local government, which is highly satisfied with the regeneration of employment and income as well as the valuation of existing properties through the increased interest of tourism investors in the settlement, may said to be in an attempt to take greatest advantage of the enlargement of tourism development in Alacati. In this context, several issues become debatable as to what extent the adopted tourism strategy is community-based and to what degree all the members of the community are enabled to participate in decision-making about tourism activity.

Investors have been one of the stakeholder groups that have benefited the most by the growing spatial scale of tourism activity in Alacati. Since economic necessity has been the driving force behind the growth of tourism in Alacati, the economic vitality was welcomed by a great part of the population. However, the success achieved in a short period has inevitably attracted outside investors, who have begun to displace the locals. Currently, the majority of

the houses and even the vacant storages have been transformed into boutique hotels and restaurants through successful restoration projects. Since the main focus has been on the maximization of profit, existing investors in the area have developed a level of consciousness in conserving and respecting the unique characteristics of particularly the historical core. However, the mentioned concern is mostly limited with architectural scale. The main concern of this profit-oriented group is that the tourism development should be taken under control as the overcrowding of the settlement in summer season may cause undesirable environmental outcomes as in the case of Antalya and Bodrum. However today, in the absence of a comprehensive restoration scheme of the local government, there is a growing concern that the restoration of historical houses mostly by the outside investors eventually leads to the displacement of local people.

Property owners, specifically the ones who have properties within the conservation area, have been the most advantageous group in economic terms. Essentially, if economic sustainability is an important dimension of a sustainable tourism strategy, then the benefits of tourism should not be shared within a specific interest group. However in Alacati, with the introduction of tourism industry and with the growing interest of investors in the conservation area, there has been an enormous increase in real estate prices, though most of them were dilapidated due to the economic insufficiencies of the owners during 1980s and 1990s. In this period, most of the property owners that sought mainly for the maximisation of their profits faced two alternatives, either selling/hiring their houses to investors and move to elsewhere or integrating in the tourism industry as the managers of their own businesses. Both of the alternatives have resulted in a dense contextual transformation process in the conservation area as the buildings, which were used in their own contextuality prior to the tourism development, began to serve as boutique hotels, restaurants, and art galleries. The volunteer migration of the property owners, who preferred to sell or hire their properties for enormous prices, brings about a displacement process outcomes of which will become visible in the future.

In tourism literature, it has been argued that the development of tourism industry also contributes to changes in the quality of life, social structure and social organization of local residents (Ratz, 2000; Mbaiwa, 2004). *Local people*, who have been living in Alacati have undoubtedly been the most effected group by the negative externalities of tourism including

air and noise pollution, traffic congestion and increased prices. Additionally, the commercial reorganisation of the main street in the conservation area as small hotels and restaurants, which utilize the historical pattern as scenery and target mainly the high income, selective visitors, has caused an externalising effect on local people. These people as being the actual users of the street were transformed into passive observers as a result of the elite commercialisation of public space (Dalgakiran and Bal, 2007).

Non-governmental organisations, specifically the ones founded by the local people (Alacati Conservation Association) and tourism initiatives of Alacati (Alacati Tourism Association) actively collaborate with the local government for the sustainable development of tourism. According to these organisations, ‘conservative tourism strategy’ of the settlement, which aimed at fostering tourism through the conservation of nature, historical assets and social pattern, has been the key determinant of the success achieved. They work for the sustainability of these conservative strategies, and place a particular significance on the restoration of stone houses and marketing of them through the slogan of ‘grandmother’s house’. Rent, large-scale tourism investments, dense construction facilities and secondary homes are believed to be the foremost threats for the settlement (Turizm Haberleri, 2007). Additionally, these associations work for the redevelopment of agricultural activity in the settlement and aim at making the viniculture for winemaking, production of pear, lavender and olive as the principal agricultural activity.

Final Remarks

The rapid growth of tourism development in Alacati raises several concerns relating to its sustainability, particularly due to its socio-cultural and environmental impacts. Externalising effect of elite commercialisation of spaces on local people, relocation of residents in the conservation area, and the development of new construction facilities in the coastal area that enable the development of large-scale, global tourism investments have all give the initial signs of the destructive effects of tourism which become visible in the absence of sustainable tourism strategies that take into account the long-term benefits of the community. The existence of diverse and mostly conflicting expectations and concerns of the stakeholders in Alacati points out a fact that all stakeholders need to be consulted and involved in tourism

decision-making processes. This is will undoubtedly have significant contributions in maintaining the settlement's story of success in the future.

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