

The Living Tradition of “Yaren Talks” as an Indigenous Community of Practice in Today’s Knowledge Society

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INTRODUCTION

The “corporations” of craftsmen and guilds of artisans can be considered as the communities of practice of ancient times and the Middle Ages. The “Ahi (Brotherhood) Organization” in the Ottoman Empire is an example of these. Today, although the Ahi Organization itself has ceased to exist, the “Yaren (Friend) Talks” still continue in certain parts of Turkey as a living tradition of the Ahi principles and practices. Viewing the continuing custom of the Yaren Talks as a precious practice of society and a unique community of practice, in this short article, we will first provide some background information about this tradition and then address some related discussions, mainly about how to make this tradition continue. We believe that the Yaren Talks will provide a rich source that can be fruitful for improving the understanding and use of communities of practice in a knowledge society.

BACKGROUND

Yaren meetings assumed an important role in the members’ life after work in the organization of Ahi.

Figure 1. Yarens in the Yaren room



Requiring its members to be honest and honorable, the Yaren organization did not allow any unethical behavior. It functioned as an educational institution, especially for the young boys in the community. The Yaren Talks also provided recreation for the members, with special events that included, among other activities, folk music and dance performances and the serving of special cuisine. The Yaren successfully played its role as an important social institution through the centuries in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey.

Çankiri, a small city in Anatolia, where the author spent his childhood, continues to organize the Yaren Talks every winter, holding onto the original principles and practices. Friends, who want to organize meetings in the cold winter months, gather and agree to establish an organization for the Yaren Talks. First, they choose the leaders of the organization, then select the other members, approved by these leaders, and decide on other issues necessary for the preparation of the meetings. The Yaren organization consists of weekly meetings, which are organized by one member in turn for an 11-week period. However, the influence of these special community events is much broader and remains much longer in the life of its members. Some explanation of this influence is as follows.

Both the members and guests invited by the organizer can participate in the Yaren Talks. The ongoing storytelling and conversation among these participants facilitate the flow of knowledge and information necessary to maintain social order in daily life. Moreover, in the Yaren meetings, any critical matter is judged privately among the members. Normally, all the routines in the meetings and in social life outside the meetings have certain rules, which the members are expected to obey. Moral and material punishments are available to discourage members from committing any immoral act or wrong

Figure 2. Examples of local plays performed in Yaren Talks



behavior; these can range from having to treat all the Yaren to a Turkish bath, meal, or shave to dismissal from the Yaren Talks, which is more severe than dismissal from one’s homeland. On the other side, if a mistake is made within the community, first the members try to sort it out without intervention by the leaders or notice by others outside the community. Thus inside the Yaren community, members undergo an influential learning process that educates them as virtuous, responsible individuals for their community and society. Finally the unique theatrical performances during the Yaren Talks require participants to know the local plays so that the continuation of these customs can be maintained.

FUTURE TRENDS

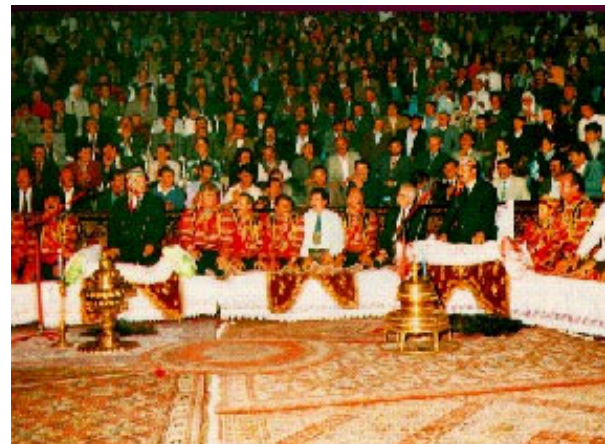
As a living tradition and custodian of indigenous values and customs, the Yaren Talks still struggle to survive, having remained mainly as a volunteer effort. While the volunteer members try to guarantee the continuation and retain the originality of the Yaren Talks, they face the problem of finding funding to maintain their organization and develop their practices. The reinterpretation of the meaning and purpose of this traditional organization can be useful in attracting the attention that members seek. The classics of the Yaren Talks can be of benefit as sources of new synthesis and innovations, so that they fulfill their social function not only to educate community members, but also to share information and transfer knowledge according to the changing conditions of the community and society. In addition, some punishments and restrictions can be moder-

ated in order to enhance the role of the Talks in the society. With a careful and considerate reinterpretation, women might also attend certain meetings. On the other hand, if the necessary meaning reconstructions are not given the importance they deserve, the risk of getting lost in the various dilemmas posed by the need to adapt a precious tradition to the changing conditions of time may result in virtual extinction, and the Yaren Talks will only be seen in folklore exhibitions.

CONCLUSION

The Yaren Talks is an exciting example of community practice. Having lasted for centuries, they are continuing into the new millennium. The rich oral and performing arts customs and the interesting interaction opportunities available for the members’ identity

Figure 3. Yaren assemblage



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