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On the shore of the Black Sea, Turkey: female farmers carrying regional agriculture

I had a chance to visit Turkey for the first time in the last 17 years. My last visit was to Kahraman Maras Prefecture near the north-west border of Syria. This time, I visited the areas around the Black Sea and learned about agriculture in the region. Turkish people are known as japanophiles. I was told during my previous visit that Turkish people are grateful for the fact that in the Meiji Era when a Turkish navy vessel shipwrecked off the coast of Japan, the Japanese villagers rescued the crew and looked after them with devotion. However, this time, I did not hear any story like this from them. I wonder whether this is because of the change in time. I was still reassured, though, feeling their same old pro-Japanese attitudes.

The eastern Black Sea region is famous for its tea and hazel nut production (70% of the world's production). Farmers grow these cash crops, cereals and vegetables for self-consumption, as well as rear livestock for milk and dairy products. The area has very little flat land and steep mountain slopes come very close to the shore of the Black Sea. Therefore it is difficult to introduce machinery and most farm work is done manually. Land productivity is correspondingly low and even production for subsistence is not sufficient. Farmers' lives are becoming increasingly difficult with the Government abolishing subsidies for cash crops such as tea and hazel nuts, and price competition is becoming severe with the entry of private sector companies in the market.

Incidentally, it is women who shoulder the agricultural industry here. They are the ones who do most of the work in the hilly farmlands, from producing subsistence crops and rearing livestock to harvesting tea and hazel nuts. In addition to agricultural work, women are engaged in child caretaking, knitting and other domestic work. They also take limited excess produce and hand made items to the market to sell. However, there is not much sense of solidarity among the women and there is very little collaboration such as cooperative sales and distribution of agricultural produce.

The Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey is considered to be one of the least developed areas in the country. There is not much of a market for excess produce apart from in the markets in nearby cities, and farmers are dependent on income from non-agricultural day work and payment from parents' retirement annuities. As a result, a large number of male labourers migrate to Europe and large cities in Turkey for work, and the percentage of old people, women and children is extremely high in agricultural villages. It is women who are sustaining the agricultural village society. The major focus of rural development in the Eastern Black Sea region is to support these women farmers who hold the fort in a man-less rural society. I cannot help hoping that the living standard will be improved for the women farmers in the declining villages who maintain the rural society, protect their families and farm the land in this harsh living environment.
(By Zaitso on the shore of Turkish Black Sea in March 2005.)



Young hazel nut leaves



Women farmers selling their produce



Women showing hand knitted shoulder