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SPIRITUAL TOURISM ON MOUNT YUNT (MANİSA): THE OBASYA EXAMPLE

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Abstract

This study investigates the spiritual tourism activities at Obasya, a rural development initiative located in the Yunt Mountain area of Manisa and evaluates the facility's economic impact. This study aims to explore the concept of spiritual tourism, which has emerged to address the psychological and spiritual needs of contemporary urban life, by focusing on the activities at the Obasya in Manisa's Yunt Mountain region. The geographical focus is the Obasya tourism area, situated in Manisa's Yunt Mountain region, seamlessly integrated with the natural environment and offering secular spiritual activities such as yoga, access bars, tarot, family constellation, laughter therapy, meditation, and tree-hugging. Furthermore, this study assessed Obasya's role in rural development and its potential impact. Utilizing qualitative field research, this study examines the spiritual practices at Obasya and evaluates its rural development potential. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including a spiritual coach, the cooperative's founder, and seven residents of nearby villages. The interviews focused on spiritual practices, visitor profiles, and Obasya's socio-economic impact. The data were analyzed using descriptive content analysis. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, this study employs field research to focus on the spiritual practices conducted at the Obasya facility. The Obasya facility has not yet fully developed economic connections with its neighboring areas. Although some initiatives have been undertaken, additional projects are needed to establish relationships that will promote rural development.

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Rural Development, Yunt Mountain, Obasya, Manisa

Öz

Bu çalışma, Manisa'nın Yunt Dağı bölgesinde bulunan bir kırsal kalkınma girişimi olan Obasya'daki manevi turizm faaliyetlerini araştırmakta ve tesisin ekonomik etkisini değerlendirmektedir. Araştırma, Manisa'nın Yunt Dağı bölgesindeki Obasya tesisindeki faaliyetlere odaklanarak, çağdaş kent yaşamının psikolojik ve manevi ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için ortaya çıkan manevi turizm kavramını incelemektedir. Coğrafi odak noktası, Manisa'nın Yunt Dağı bölgesinde bulunan, doğal çevreyle uyumlu bir şekilde bütünleşmiş ve yoga, erişim çubukları, tarot, aile dizilimi, gülme terapisi, meditasyon ve ağaç kucaklama gibi seküler manevi faaliyetler sunan Obasya turizm bölgesidir. Ayrıca, çalışma Obasya'nın kırsal kalkınmadaki rolünü ve potansiyel etkisini değerlendirmektedir. Niteliksel saha araştırması kullanılarak, bu çalışma Obasya'daki manevi uygulamaları incelemekte ve kırsal kalkınma potansiyelini değerlendirmektedir. Ruhani koç, kooperatifin kurucusu ve yakın köylerden yedi sakin dahil olmak üzere kilit bilgi kaynaklarıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış ve bu görüşmelerde ruhani uygulamalar, ziyaretçi profilleri ve Obasya'nın sosyo-ekonomik etkisi üzerinde durulmuştur. Veriler, betimsel içerik analizi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Niteliksel bir araştırma metodolojisi benimseyen bu çalışma, saha araştırmasını kullanarak Obasya tesisinde yürütülen manevi uygulamalara odaklanmaktadır. Obasya tesisinin komşu bölgelerle henüz tam olarak ekonomik bağlar kurmamış olduğu belirtilmelidir. Bazı girişimlerde bulunmuş olsa da, kırsal kalkınmayı teşvik edecek ilişkilerin kurulması için ek projeler gereklidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Spiritüel turizm, Kırsal kalkınma, Yunt Dağı, Obasya, Manisa

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the postmodern era, tourism has undergone significant transformations within societies, marked by a shift from traditional frameworks (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Postmodernism has paved the way for alternative forms of tourism (Emekli, 2021), and as production and consumption practices in the tourism sector have evolved, new spatial manifestations have emerged (Tırı & Kervankıran, 2024). Pine and Gilmore (2011) suggest that the economy has shifted to an experience-based model, with tourism playing a pivotal role in this transition. In this context, tourism has moved beyond its traditional role as a leisure activity, becoming a crucial domain for identity construction, personal development/self-discovery, the pursuit of authenticity, and the experience economy (Cohen, 2010). Within the context of postmodern consumer culture, sacred symbols and rituals are frequently extracted from their original historical and philosophical contexts and reinterpreted to align with the aspirations and imaginations of spiritual seekers (Aydemir, 2020). The advent of social media platforms has markedly facilitated the proliferation of alternative forms of tourism. The widespread visibility of spiritual tourism is largely due to the "constant sharing of experiences on social media" (Smith & Puczko, 2014). Against this theoretical backdrop, there has been a recent increase in people's non-materialistic desires, leading to the emergence of a different type of tourism known as 'spiritual tourism' (Halim et al., 2021). The demands of contemporary urban living and the limitations of conventional religions have heightened interest in spiritual practices that focus on personal growth, spiritual healing, and the search for meaning in life (The Times, 2025). The commercialization of spiritual rituals, termed "secular religion" by Timothy and Conover (2006), has given rise to spiritual tourism. This type of tourism involves traveling for spiritual growth, self-exploration, inner peace, or personal transformation (Norman, 2012). Such journeys may include visiting holy sites, participating in rituals, meditating, or engaging with spiritual traditions. Spiritual tourism also encompasses trips aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of spiritual traditions through visits to temples, monasteries, or sacred locations, as well as cultural and religious heritage (Raj & Griffin, 2015). Examples of these journeys include pilgrimages such as the Hajj in Mecca, Camino de Santiago in Spain, and Kumano Kodo in Japan (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Cheer et al., 2017). In addition to religiously based spiritual practices, secular activities linked to the New Age movement are also part of this category. The New Age movement has seen notable growth among those dissatisfied with the increasingly fast-paced and materialistic lifestyle and the inadequacy of traditional religions (Timothy & Conover, 2006). New Age and holistic experiences emphasize practices that attract those seeking spirituality, such as energy therapies in Sedona or Ayahuasca rituals in Peru (Winkelman, 2005; Sutphen, 2022).

The growth of tourism activities and the changing perspective on tourism are largely rooted in urban areas, where most people live. Industrialization, globalization, and rapid urban expansion have negatively impacted the mental health of urban residents. Factors such as rapid urban growth, high population density, traffic congestion, environmental pollution, and social isolation contribute to increased stress levels among urban dwellers, adversely affecting their psychological health (Evans, 2003). An overly stimulating urban environment leads to cognitive overload, which is associated with a rise in psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Lederbogen et al., 2011). Furthermore, urban living weakens social connections. Anonymity, deteriorating neighborly relations, and growing individualism result in reduced social support networks and heightened loneliness (Putnam, 2000). In major metropolitan areas, fast-paced work environments and competitive lifestyles have led to widespread burnout syndrome (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Additionally, the limited exposure to nature typical of urban settings negatively impacts mental health. Studies have shown that access to green spaces can reduce stress levels, enhance cognitive function, and support overall mental health (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1991). However, the reduction of natural areas in many large cities limits the sources of psychological relief for urban residents. The situation in cities has also led to shifts in people's beliefs and their sense of meaning. The New Age movement, which encompasses personal spiritual quests, eclectic belief systems, alternative medicine, and mystical experiences, emerged alongside this process. The New Age movement distances itself from traditional religious authorities and emphasizes personal discovery and transformation (Heelas, 2008a). Drawing from various traditions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Western esotericism, and modern science, New Age differs from the collective and dogmatic structures of traditional religion. Key aspects

of the New Age movement include yoga, neo-pagan and shamanic rituals, meditation, reiki, energy work, and healing practices (Levin, 2022). The New Age also signifies a shift in worldview, offering new ways for individuals to connect with the universe and live in harmony. Modernization, secularization, and disillusionment with traditional religious structures have driven people to seek new forms of spiritual expression. In this context, the New Age represents a quest for spiritual fulfillment in response to the uncertainties and spiritual voids of the modern world (Heelas, 2008b).

The lockdowns and quarantines initiated in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered individuals' motivations and attitudes toward tourism in the subsequent post-pandemic period. There has been a notable increase in interest in touristic activities following Covid-19 (Kuo, 2020). This period, frequently referred to as "revenge tourism" (Das, 2021), experienced a surge in spiritual tourism, motivated by feelings of existential void, nihilism, and a quest for meaning in the pandemic's aftermath (Robledo et al., 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed significant vulnerabilities in urban life, especially in major cities (Florida et al., 2023). With the surge in fleeing to the countryside, urban residents have turned to rural areas that are less crowded, safer, and closer to nature, either permanently or temporarily. In the post-Covid era, spiritual tourism has emerged as a highly favored option because of its therapeutic benefits (Bhalla et al., 2021).

Among the spiritual destinations found around the world are pilgrimage routes, temples, mountains, and sacred sites that have been the cornerstones of human culture throughout history. Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East stand out as prominent destinations for spiritual tourism. Shinto and Buddhist temples, Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, the Vatican, Santiago de Compostela, Mecca, Medina, and the city of Jerusalem are significant religiously-oriented spiritual routes (Olçay & Albuz, 2016). Developed policies and directed investments impact the spatial distribution of spiritual tourism. The "Incredible India" initiative, launched in 2002, has brought India to the forefront in terms of international spiritual tourism routes. The spatial distribution of spiritual tourism in Turkey has been shaped in recent years by the growing interest in spirituality. In addition to religious travel, yoga camps and meditation in Fethiye (Muğla), shamanic rituals and energy practices in Olympos (Antalya), slow living and spiritual workshops in Seferihisar (İzmir), and shamanism and breath therapy in Cappadocia (Nevşehir) have become main routes for spiritual tourists. Turkey's Aegean and Mediterranean coasts are areas where spiritual activities are highly concentrated.

Collective or individual visits motivated by religion, faith, and pilgrimage—rooted in spiritual feelings—have created an independent type of tourism within the tourism industry and led to the emergence of new destinations (Yüksel & Baykal, 2022). Although spiritual tourism has ancient roots associated with religion, it has gained momentum with the spread of globalization. The search for meaning amidst capitalist and urban lifestyles, coupled with issues such as anonymity, loneliness, social isolation, mental health challenges, and the recent impact of Covid-19—exacerbated by social media's influence—has led individuals to explore the spiritual realm (Lorber et al., 2023). As traditional tourism activities have diversified in the current context, spiritual tourism has increasingly distinguished itself from faith-based, religion-focused tourism and is becoming more prevalent.

In alignment with global trends, Turkey is experiencing an increased demand for spiritual rituals. Despite the growing attention in international literature, a review of the existing literature reveals a lack of emphasis on spiritual tourism within Turkey. The nation's social fabric, shaped by diverse interpretations of secularism and religiosity (Göle, 2019), coupled with its geographical diversity, indicates significant potential for spiritual tourism. With its deep-rooted history, cultural heritage, and the presence of spiritual traditions such as Alevism, Bektashism, and Mevlevi Sufism, Anatolia holds a highly favorable position for spiritual tourism (Ünal & Demirkol, 2022). In addition to the advantage of its geographical location, Turkey's local characteristics and regional differences make it a suitable country for many types of tourism (Emekli et al., 2006).

This study examines the spiritual tourism activities conducted at Obasya, a rural development initiative in the Yunt Mountain area of Manisa. This study aims to explore the concept of spiritual tourism, which has evolved in response to the psychological and spiritual demands of modern urban living, through the lens of spiritual

tourism activities at the Obasya facility in the Yunt Mountain region of Manisa. This study also assessed Obasya's impact on rural development and its potential.

OBASYA RURAL ACCOMMODATION FACILITY: ESTABLISHMENT AND PURPOSE

In 2014, the Yunt Mountains Sub-Action Plan and Tourism Destinations Project were initiated with the support of the Zafer Development Agency. The primary objectives of this project were to enhance the influx of both domestic and international tourists to Manisa, foster the development of rural and cultural tourism in the region, and broaden the scope of rural, nature, and cultural tourism in the region. As part of this initiative, a comprehensive investigation was planned to encompass archaeological sites within the Yunt Mountain region, which is home to 61 Yörük villages linked to the economically disadvantaged district of Yunussemre, and to identify new tourist attractions in the area. This project aims to facilitate the creation of innovative implementation models and institutional strategies for rural and cultural tourism sectors. It seeks to establish tourism destinations in the Yunt Mountain Region that emphasize local stone architecture, traditional lifestyles, and crafts such as carpets, kilims, weaving, needlework, and lacework, in addition to natural and historical attractions. Furthermore, routes for cycling, horseback riding, and trekking should be identified. The Obasya Tourism Development Cooperative is one of the project's stakeholders. Plans include the construction of stone buildings that reflect the region's architectural style, a felt boutique hotel, and a large multi-purpose oba tent on 7.5 acres of the Cooperative's 102-acre property in the Yunt Mountain Region, thereby establishing a sustainable foundation for diversifying and enhancing rural tourism (Photo 1).



Photo 1- Aerial View of Obasya (Obasya.com.tr)

Founded by Mustafa Pala as part of a European Union-supported initiative, the Cooperative is situated in the Türkmen, Dazyurt, and Ortaköy areas, within the Yunt Mountain region of Manisa. Comprising 110

members, its mission is to revitalize local architecture and culture while preserving the natural environment of the area. Investment in this underdeveloped area seeks to enhance Manisa's tourism appeal, stimulate local growth, and elevate its profile nationally and internationally. At the Obasya Rural Accommodation Facility, traditional earth and stone houses, which were once on the brink of collapse in the Yun Mountain region, have been researched and restored to preserve and transmit traditional architectural style. In addition to stone houses and nomadic tents, Obasya features a women's clothing museum and a time passage museum (Mustafa Pala, Founder of the Cooperative). Spiritualism emphasizes the interconnectedness of nature, linking every living being and element. From this perspective, all entities in nature are part of a universal energy flow connected to the depths of the human soul (Elkins et al., 1988). This spiritual viewpoint aligns with the Gaia hypothesis, which posits that all living organisms on Earth are interdependent and essential for each other's survival (de Diego-Cordero et al., 2024). These philosophies underscore the profound connection between nature and the spirit. Physical environmental elements such as lakes, mountains, and forests play a crucial role in spiritual experiences (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Obasya's geographical features can be viewed through the lens of spiritual tourism. When considering Obasya's location and its geographical traits, its lush landscape emerges as a key aspect. While Obasya captivates with its distinct energy, its peace and quiet are among the factors that nurture the human spirit. Obasya's spiritual coach articulates the significance of the geographical environment as follows:

“When we dive into spiritual tourism, especially by immersing ourselves in nature and boosting our energetic awareness, the transformation becomes quite clear. Spending time outdoors and staying connected to nature allows us to tap into the energy of air, earth, and our surroundings. These activities help us achieve a strong balance physically, mentally, and spiritually. The focus here is on maintaining an individual's energetic balance, often with the help of natural stones like chalcedony and certain types of trees. Trees, in particular, are vital for maintaining this balance. Through special meditations, like tree hugging, we connect with the tree's energy and find inner harmony. During these meditations, we can feel the tree's energy and become part of the natural balance. For example, we connect to the earth through the root chakra, a practice known as grounding, which helps balance all our energy bodies. Meanwhile, our breath is linked to the air, and we refer to oxygen as 'prana.' Prana is part of the universal life energy, and by spreading the energy within oxygen throughout our body, we nourish our energy systems. Essentially, by working in harmony with nature's resources, we aim to balance our energy and support inner transformation”.

Obasya's geography is well-suited to the nature of spiritual rituals. This geographical feature increases the region's potential for rural development driven by tourism. Rural development not only involves visiting rural areas, but also refers to establishing a deep connection with the natural environment and local culture (Soykan, 1999).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the aftermath of major crises such as global pandemics, people often begin to contemplate the purpose of life, choosing travel experiences that are more personal and meaningful, rather than the traditional sea-sand-sun tourism (Aydođdu-Atasoy, 2021). The study of spiritual tourism has seen a significant increase, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic (Srivastava, 2023). Categorizing these studies could facilitate a comprehensive mapping of the existing literature on this topic. As a relatively nascent research area, initial studies on spiritual tourism have been predominantly exploratory and descriptive. These theoretical works aim to define spiritual tourism and establish related concepts and classifications (Kiper et al., 2025; Smith, 2022; Cheer et al., 2017; Norman, 2012). Field research, a qualitative method frequently employed in the social sciences, seeks to explore a specific phenomenon, process, group, individual, institution, or event within its particular context (Yin, 2009). Research in this category investigates the motivations behind the growing interest in spiritual practices and the resulting economic, political, and cultural changes (Cengiz & Gür, 2021; Küçükural et al., 2021; Dede et al., 2023; Demiryürek, 2024). For men who often conceal their spiritual interests due to societal gender roles, their spiritual pursuits are driven by self-preservation, competence, and empowerment (Cengiz & Gür 2021). For religious women, engaging in the spiritual realm—which offers self-fulfillment, transformation, and meaning in

addressing daily challenges and uncertainties—has led them to critique traditional religion, often centered on fear and pressure (Demiryürek, 2024). In Slovakia, spiritual tourism, as a specialized form of tourism, is favored by older and devout travelers (Šebová et al., 2025). As illustrated, ongoing societal changes have led to the emergence of spiritual practices either as an extension of traditional religion or as an alternative phenomenon. The shift towards spiritual tourism is influenced by social upheavals, as well as factors like gender, belief, and age. Besides theoretical studies with psychological and sociological angles, there are also studies that explore spiritual practices in spatial terms. Similar to our research focus, these studies assess a location's potential for spiritual tourism, the perceptions of local residents, and its impact on regional and rural development. Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, Nepal, and China, with their geographical features—sacred sites, mountains, waterfalls, forests, and rivers—are significant spiritual tourism destinations. Alas Kedaton in Bali, for example, contributes to regional economic development by generating income and prosperity and creating jobs (Sanjaya et al., 2019). In India's Uttarakhand region, spiritual tourism activities have become a key driver of the local economy, positively affecting the hospitality sector and local trade volume (Sharma & Jain, 2023). Furthermore, economic development has the potential for sustainability due to the environmental sensitivity of spiritual tourism (Sirirat, 2019). Spiritual tourism, which aligns with sustainable tourism and "slow tourism" approaches (Šebová et al., 2025), fits the definition of creative tourism as it enhances awareness of the natural and cultural environment, unlocks its potential, creates economic value, generates employment, and prioritizes local communities (Zoğal & Emekli, 2017). Spiritual tourism, which incorporates local cuisine, crafts, and guides, facilitates the establishment of robust and environmentally sustainable connections with local economies and communities (Sutarya, 2022). This direct engagement with the local culture and economy, when supported by residents, governmental bodies, and investors, can result in the creation of a tourism village focused on spiritual activities. For instance, Jasri village in Bali has achieved sustainable growth and begun contributing to the local economy, owing to the residents' environmental conservation efforts, governmental guidance and official recognition, and investors' financial support and innovation (Suniastha Amerta, 2017). In conclusion, research on spiritual tourism remains limited. Although numerous theoretical studies exist, there is a paucity of concrete findings supported by empirical research (Ünal & Demirkol, 2022; Bhalla et al., 2021). Researchers have noted that addressing this gap and enhancing academic accessibility will be beneficial for future studies. Furthermore, the economic and social impacts of spiritual sites are significant research areas (Šebová et al., 2025). This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of spiritual tourism through activities at the Obasya facility in the Yunt Mountain region of Manisa. Consistent with the literature, this study also assesses the potential of spiritual tourism to foster rural development. This study addresses the lack of spatial and empirical research in the existing literature.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Spiritual tourism encompasses visits to sacred sites, participation in rituals, meditation, the pursuit of transcendence, and exploration of self-awareness (Norman, 2012). Theoretical insights into spiritual tourism have been derived from the disciplines of religion, psychology, sociology and tourism. Halim and others (2021) categorize spiritual tourism into two primary dimensions: the institutionalized religious aspect, which includes pilgrimages, sacred sites, rituals, religious identity, and communal experiences, and the secular aspect, which involves yoga, meditation, nature-based activities, healing, and personal growth. Motivations for spiritual tourism vary between these perspectives and are influenced by both secular and religious viewpoints. From a secular perspective, motivations such as health, healing, personal growth, self-exploration, and leisure are prominent, whereas from a religious perspective, ritual practices, identity, social interaction, religious elements, and cultural traditions are the main drivers (Cheer et al., 2017). Consequently, spiritual tourism often blurs the line between sacred and ordinary (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Spiritual tourism is a broad concept that goes beyond religious travel (Ünal & Demirkol, 2022; Altınay-Özdemir et al., 2018). The concept of pilgrimage is a commonly employed theoretical framework in spiritual tourism. Pilgrimage, a form of worship and atonement, involves religious journeys to sacred locations such as Mecca (Saudi Arabia), Jerusalem (Israel), Kumano Kodō (Japan), Camino de Santiago (Spain) and Varanasi (India). Turner and Turner (1978) described pilgrimage as a

“liminal” experience, suggesting that these journeys disrupt individuals’ daily routines and facilitate spiritual rejuvenation. This notion remains pertinent in contemporary spiritual tourism, as individuals seek personal transformation beyond religious experiences (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). These experiences and transformations relate to Wang’s (1999) concept of existential authenticity, which highlights the pursuit of genuine experiences that enable individuals to connect with their true selves. Within the secular dimension of spiritual tourism, individuals often seek transformation through meditation retreats, yoga, and holistic healing. In this regard, spiritual tourism aligns with MacCannell’s (1976) perspective, which views it as a quest for authenticity. Many spiritual tourists aim for self-realization through experiences that promote mindfulness, inner peace, and connection with a higher power. Wellness camps, meditation workshops, and nature-based spiritual tourism resonate with these psychological motivations (Smith & Kelly, 2006).

Halim and others (2021) proposed a framework elucidating the motivations underpinning spiritual tourism:

-Meaning and purpose in life: This involves the pursuit of existential meaning, encompassing aspects such as identity, belonging, and the attainment of a fulfilling life in postmodern societies.

- **Consciousness:** Mindfulness practices and retreats enhance individual consciousness.
- **Transcendence:** Liminal experiences and New Age practices enable individuals to transcend their current state and elevate their energy.
- **Spiritual resources:** Locations (temples), rituals (pilgrimages, yoga), and mentors augment the individual's experience.
- **Self-determination:** Participants are afforded the opportunity to design their spiritual journeys.
- **Reflection and spiritual purification:** This offers individuals the opportunity to reflect on their past and engage in spiritual cleansing.
- **Spiritual coping:** Provides an alternative means of addressing contemporary societal issues such as stress, anxiety, and burnout.
- Norman (2012) classifies the experiences of spiritual tourists into five categories:
- **Healing:** Entails the pursuit of spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing.
- **Experience:** Destinations where spiritual tourists engage with diverse cultures and religious philosophies or immerse themselves in various religious traditions and practices.
- **Quest:** Journeys undertaken in search of meaning and personal discovery.
- **Retreat:** Locations where individuals seek a socio-geographical escape, experience life away from their usual environments, and utilize secular attractions for spiritual purposes.
- **Collective:** Comprises individuals who travel to "spiritual centers" for spiritual vacations.

Heelas (2008b) argues that contemporary spirituality is highly personalized, with individuals crafting their own spiritual paths by integrating elements from diverse religious and philosophical traditions. This perspective elucidates why spiritual tourism encompasses such a broad spectrum, from pilgrimage visits to alternative healing rituals. In Obasya, the geographical focus of this study, secular practices of spiritual tourism (such as yoga, tarot, family constellation, access bars, laughter therapy, tree hugging, etc.) are conducted. Consequently, this study focuses on the secular practices of spiritual tourism.

5. METHODOLOGY

Research in the field of spiritual tourism has employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative investigations have involved fieldwork aligned with specific objectives, utilizing secondary data analysis from sources such as government publications, academic research, tourist data, and other publicly accessible information (Sharma & Jain, 2023). Conversely, qualitative research has predominantly relied on

fieldwork and employed data collection methods such as literature analysis, observation, and in-depth interviews. Comprehensive survey questions derived from data reviews were used in interviews with experts and visitors engaged in the educational aspects of the subject. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted, adopting a phenomenological approach to examine the spiritual and emotional factors influencing spiritual tourists' motivations and satisfaction levels. Qualitative analysis involved categorizing data, establishing connections, interpreting, and drawing conclusions (Özbek, 2024; Sutarya, 2022; Altun & Çınar, 2019). Studies exploring the relationship between spiritual tourism and regional development were analyzed using an integrated framework (Pageh et al., 2022; Sanjaya et al., 2019). A mixed-methods approach combining surveys and participatory action research (PAR) was used for a comprehensive analysis. The purposive sampling method was enhanced by the snowball technique, and the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) was employed to rank the motivational factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit spiritual destinations (Sharma & Jain, 2023; Garg et al., 2021; Sirirat, 2019).

This exploratory study aims to investigate the emerging phenomenon of spiritual tourism and to understand its impact on rural development. The study focuses on the Obasya tourism area in the Yunt Mountain region of Manisa, which integrates with the natural environment and offers secular spiritual practices such as yoga, access bars, tarot, family constellation, laughter therapy, and tree hugging. Obasya, located in the Yunt Mountain region of Manisa, has come to the forefront as an example that can illustrate the relationship between spiritual tourism and geography, thanks to its tranquility, clean air, and natural landscape features. In addition, it has made it possible to study the processes of spiritual tourism and rural development in a holistic manner.

This study employs a qualitative field research methodology to explore the spiritual practices at Obasya. Furthermore, it evaluates the potential for rural development by analyzing the socio-economic dynamics surrounding Obasya. For practical considerations, interviews were conducted with key informants, including a spiritual coach, the founder of the cooperative, an employee of Obasya, and seven residents from the villages of Ortaköy, Dazyurt, and Türkmen, rather than with spiritual tourists (Table 1). The spiritual coach, possessing extensive experience in spiritual coaching, serves as a key informant in profiling spiritual tourists. This informant provides valuable insights into the research area, thereby enhancing the study's information and facilitating a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena. Interviews with key informants can yield more detailed and systematic information compared to those conducted with members of the target group (Tongco, 2007).

Table 1- Interviewer Table

| Code | Gender | Age |
|---------------------|---------------|------------|
| Spiritual Coach | Female | 60 |
| Cooperative Founder | Male | 80 |
| Obasya's Employee | Male | 32 |
| P1 | Male | 35 |
| P2 | Male | 65 |
| P3 | Female | 70 |
| P4 | Male | 65 |
| P5 | Male | 25 |
| P6 | Female | 22 |
| P7 | Male | 42 |

Interviews with participants were conducted during three separate visits in March 2025, May 2025, and September 2025. Semi-structured interviews were guided by themes identified through fieldwork and research, focusing on a) spiritual practices at Obasya, b) the profile of spiritual tourists visiting Obasya, and c) the impact of Obasya on rural development. During the interview with the cooperative founder, questions were asked about the establishment of Obasya, its objectives, and the process of its realization. The spiritual coach at Obasya provided information about the spiritual activities conducted at the facility, the relationship of spiritual rituals with the natural environment, and the participant profile (where they come from, age, education, etc.). Villagers were asked questions to determine whether they were aware of Obasya, what they thought about Obasya, the economic contributions and future potential of Obasya for the region, its relationships with the local people, and

its interaction with local culture and traditions. The audio recordings were subjected to descriptive content analysis based on themes created to explore spiritual tourism. The codebook was developed through an integration of insights from both existing literature and empirical fieldwork. Accordingly, the profile of spiritual tourists, spiritual rituals, employment and economic impact, and Obasya's relationship with the environment were determined as the main themes.

The Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences at Manisa Celal Bayar University has granted ethics committee approval for this study, conducted in accordance with established principles of research and publication ethics.

6. FINDINGS

The findings are systematically presented in alignment with the themes delineated in the Methodology section of this paper. Specifically, the study assessed the spiritual activities available at the Obasya Rural Accommodation Facility, examined the socio-economic characteristics of spiritual tourists, and analyzed their influence on rural development utilizing data obtained from the interviews.

6.1. Spiritual practices in Obasya and the profile of spiritual tourists

Spiritual tourism, influenced by both secular and religious perspectives, encompasses visits to sacred sites, transcendental experiences, self-discovery, and ritual engagement (Norman, 2011). Spirituality-centered activities include family constellations, access bars, reiki, laughter yoga, breathing exercises, meditations, energy work, and traditional rituals for special occasions, such as Nevruz. The objective is to purify oneself from the negative influences of daily life through holistic practice.

"I create a personalized program for them by blending practices that offer physical, mental, and spiritual relaxation in their daily lives. Plus, family constellation sessions and group activities are also part of this journey" (Spiritual Coach).

Visitors to Obasya, whether participating in activities or staying overnight in hotels designed like nomadic tents, come from a wide range of geographical locations and socio-economic backgrounds. Those engaging in tourist activities for spiritual purposes are not only from İzmir and Manisa but also from Ankara and Istanbul. Additionally, a few visitors travel from other countries to visit the Obasya.

"Our target audience includes people who are interested in traveling from Manisa to rural areas and spending time there. We also see participation from nearby regions like İzmir, Manisa, and Aliağa, and occasionally from abroad and other provinces. This area, which we've set up as a hiking route for travel groups, tends to attract a well-educated crowd and tradespeople with a good income level" (Spiritual Coach).

Schwarz (2013), Ali-Knight and Ensor (2017), and Pathak (2024) suggest that spiritual tourists predominantly consist of middle-aged or older individuals from middle- or upper-income brackets, possessing a high level of education. An analysis of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of those visiting Obasya for spiritual purposes reveals that they are generally well educated, affluent, and employed in white-collar professions. Although women constitute the majority of participants in spiritual activities, there is also a notable presence of younger male visitors engaging in these practices.

"There were quite a few people from the civil service, along with many lawyers and engineers. When it came to listing professions, housewives followed. These individuals generally had a somewhat higher level of education" (Spiritual Coach).

The distribution of spiritual tourism activities exhibits seasonal fluctuations throughout the year. During peak seasons, there is a marked increase in both overnight accommodations and the demand for the facility's services, with these peak periods typically occurring in the spring months. Spiritual tourists visiting Obasya are most frequently observed in the autumn and spring months as well.

6.2. The (expected) effects of Obasya on rural development

The Yuntdağı villagers are integral to the Yunt Mountain Sub-Action Plan and Tourism Destinations initiative, which includes the Obasya Rural Accommodation Facility. By engaging local residents in tourism through crafts, local products, and village guesthouses, there is an anticipated enhancement in the awareness of preserving cultural values, as well as the historical and natural environment. Furthermore, these investments are expected to positively influence employment opportunities in the Yunt Mountain villages. Tourism activities contribute to job creation and income generation (Pageh et al., 2022; Sanjaya et al., 2019), with employment primarily focused on repair and maintenance tasks and service industries.

“People from nearby villages are coming here, and members of the local community are taking care of the garden, repairs, and renovations. For the bakery section, we are considering selecting local women. There are 3-4 people working here, and most of them are from the local area” (Spiritual Coach). (Photo 2)



Photo 2- Village women preparing meals for the visitors (Obasya.com.tr)

Tourism enterprises engage with their environment not only by generating employment opportunities but also by procuring local products for their operations. Spiritual tourists stimulate the demand for natural and organic food (Jaepfo et al., 2025). Collaboration with local suppliers enhances the sustainability of tourism businesses' supply chains while ensuring a stable income for small-scale producers in the region. Consequently, the tourism industry exerts a positive influence on the service sector and other facets of the local economy (Faber & Gaubert, 2019).

“We're moving forward by focusing on supply and demand, with the wonderful support of the women in our village. This summer, we're gathering ingredients for tomato sauce, various breakfast spreads, and tarhana. We also purchase natural products like butter, milk, and yogurt from nearby villages and work together with local women to make them here. By doing this, we're not only helping to develop the region but also promoting our name, Obasya” (Spiritual Coach).

The utilization of organic and natural products enhances the experiences of tourists and contributes to environmental sustainability and the preservation of local traditions. In this regard, the emphasis placed by tourism enterprises on sourcing local products enhances customer satisfaction and stimulates regional growth (Cigale & Lampič, 2023). The villages of Dazyurt, Türkmen, and Ortaköy, which are in close proximity to Obasya, have been the focus of interviews that reveal that the establishment of Obasya has increased the number of visitors to the region and supported the promotion of these villages.

“Obasya drew people from nearby areas, and as a result, Ortaköy gained recognition. This influx of visitors, including many foreigners and people from neighboring regions, helped put our village and the surrounding ones on the map” (P5).

“Visitors to Obasya often take the opportunity to explore our Dazyurt village and the nearby communities as well” (P6).

While the Obasya Rural Accommodation facility was anticipated to provide economic benefits to adjacent villages as part of the Yunt Mountain Sub-Action Plan and Tourism Destinations project, it has become evident that a disconnect persists between the local community and the enterprise. Although the local populace acknowledges Obasya's substantial potential for the villages, numerous interviewees observed that economic linkages, such as product supply and employment, remain insufficiently developed. The Obasya enterprise has articulated intentions to initiate projects aimed at employing local women and promoting local products, aspirations that are also shared by the local community.

“They have the option to hire employees from the local villagers” (P6).

“At the moment, nothing is happening; we need something to draw attention so that our village gets noticed. We hope to see more places like Obasya, which would help put our village on the map” (P1).

There appears to be a communication gap between Obasya and the surrounding community, which is believed to originate from the local community's perception of the New Age spiritual practices in Obasya. Activities and events designed for tourists that do not align with local customs, traditions, or lifestyles may not be well received by residents. Consequently, the interaction between tourists, tourist facilities, and the local community becomes limited, rendering tourism activities an experience solely for tourists (Smith, 2009).

7. CONCLUSION

The Obasya facility, managed by the Obasya Tourism Development Cooperative, aims to enhance and diversify local tourism through its stone structures, a felt boutique hotel, and a spacious multipurpose oba tent, all reflecting the culture and architecture of the Yunt Mountain region. Since the project's inception, the facility has undergone numerous transformations, with funding directed towards establishing it as a spiritual hub where spiritual activities are conducted. It attracts visitors from various locations, particularly Manisa and Izmir. Spiritual tourists, predominantly educated, white-collar women over middle age, range from those with traditional religious views to those leading a secular lifestyle, aligning with the existing literature. Cengiz and Gür (2021) highlighted that spiritual inclinations differ by gender, with men often concealing their spiritual side. Discussions on spiritual practices have centered on the balance between religiosity and secularism. Demiryürek (2024) suggested that due to the oppressive and fear-driven nature of traditional religions, religious women are gravitating towards spirituality and have become critical of religion. Conversely, Šebová et al. (2025) found that in Slovakia, older and religious demographics favor spiritual tourism. It is evident that spiritual practices have either been incorporated into religion or have emerged as alternatives. The reasons for the shift towards spiritual tourism differ based on gender, belief, and age, reflecting societal changes.

Research has shown that the characteristics of spiritual tourists visiting Obasya are diverse. Spiritual tourism, which emphasizes environmental conservation and respect for local communities, offers substantial economic advantages for the sector's growth and commercialization, thereby promoting economic progress through job creation and income generation (Halim et al., 2021). This form of tourism has the potential to enhance regional income, generate employment opportunities, and improve living standards (Pageh et al., 2022;

Sanjaya et al., 2019). In Turkey, urban expansion has historically occurred at the expense of rural areas, with declining populations and agricultural challenges bringing rural development to the forefront of policy discourse. Rural tourism is not just about visiting rural areas, but involves a deep integration with the natural environment and local culture (Soykan, 1999). Initiatives targeting rural regions aim to transform the socioeconomically disadvantaged status of these areas. In the United Kingdom, rural economies have encountered significant challenges, prompting efforts to promote rural church tourism, which has evolved into broader strategies to support rural communities through tourism spending (Rotherham, 2015). Incorporating cultural or religious heritage into tourism marketing offers opportunities to diversify the tourism offerings (Šebová et al., 2025). Spiritual tourism, which has recently gained popularity and aligns with sustainable and slow tourism principles, presents considerable potential for rural development. Economic growth should be inclusive, empowering, and beneficial to local communities (Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). The Obasya facility has not yet fully established economic connections with its surrounding areas. Although some initiatives have been undertaken, additional projects are necessary to build relationships that promote rural development. Primarily, a communication network should be established between facilities and nearby villages. This network will help the local population become familiar with New Age spiritual practices. Currently, there appears to be a bias against spiritual practices among the locals. Collaboration will enhance Obasya's influence on employment, the supply and marketing of local products, and ultimately its impact on economic development. Enhancing relationships with local producers can facilitate the incorporation of traditional handicrafts and products into spiritual tourism. Educational workshops and activities centered on New Age spirituality can promote public acceptance of spiritual tourism. The cooperative initiatives established by Obasya with its surrounding community are critically important for amplifying their impact.

While interest in spiritual tourism is on the rise in Turkey, academic research has predominantly concentrated on faith-based tourism. This study endeavors to address this gap in the literature. The research investigates changes in social structure and the orientation toward New Age practices within international literature, as well as religiosity-secularism, and the impact of spiritual tourism on promoting rural development, using the example of Obasya in Turkey. The formation of spiritual tourist profiles based on gender, belief, and lifestyle underscores the importance of evaluating spiritual practices within the tourism context in countries like Turkey, where secularization and traditional religiosity create a distinctive social structure. Spiritual tourism addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between rural economic transformation and the integration of local communities—an area that has not been sufficiently examined. The findings of the study provide a foundation for comparative research on how spiritual tourism emerges and becomes localized within cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

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