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Falconer at the El Haouaria festival

Tunis - Falconry — the art of hunting with falcons as the lovers of this tradition love to call it — is a deep-rooted practice in the Cap Bon Peninsula in far north-eastern Tunisia. Falconry is a valuable tradition in terms of history and heritage. However, experts and falconry lovers are concerned about neglect of the documentation of this heritage.

Experts said falconry has had an elevated status in ancient and recent history of Tunisia. Research about

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the cultural heritage of falconry in the Cap Bon Peninsula amounts to an exploration of the intangible heritage and an examination of the emotional and non-emotional collective memory of the local community.

The legacy of ancestors and the collective memory provide a valuable source of information about the skills, techniques, varieties and different practices of falconry. Oral tradition, poetry, tales, stories and anecdotes underline a rich experience and provide researchers with valuable references and facts about the various practices of hunting with birds of prey.

The Tunisian Cap Bon Peninsula is known as a major pathway for migratory birds travelling between Europe, Africa and Asia. The passage of different species of birds and hawks commonly occurs from El Haouaria, at the tip of the peninsula, towards the island of Sicily.


There in far north-eastern Tunisia, falconers use different tools, techniques, methods and skills. An Arab influence can be seen in the adoption of names of hawks and falconry expressions.

The training and use of birds of prey to hunt is an ancient tradition that came under the influence of many civilisations and cultures. Eventually, falconry in Tunisia acquired a distinctiveness with special characteristics that turned the sport into one of the symbols of the republic.

Since Tunisian independence, falconry has been celebrated through a number of festivals.

Organised each year at the end of the spring hunting season, the Sparrowhawk Festival in El Haouaria reflects the attachment of the locals to their heritage.



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The 2016 theme was: With Culture, We Raise

Generations

"The festival promotes ecological tourism as it showcases the sparrowhawk as well as the caves and other bird populations in the area. You can find the bird in the whole region and even in every house. It is that steeped in our culture," said Mohamed Ayad, vice-president of the festival.

The festival, which began in 1967, attracts tourists from all over, especially those who want to discover the art of traditional falconry in addition to enjoying the cultural heritage of El Haouaria.


"Hunting with falcons is part of the cultural heritage. We inherited this from our great-grandfathers. The belief is that we inherited this from the Ottoman empire as we share the same hunting method with the Turks," said Hedi ben Fraj, president of the Falconers' Association.

The festival's main event is a competition that determines the best falconer. Falconry consists of catching a sparrowhawk in March and training it to hunt quail.

"The falcon is a migratory bird. It spends the winter in South Africa then flies to Europe when the weather is warmer. El Haouaria is on the circuit of the migration of the bird. When the weather is not suitable for migration, the birds nest in El Haouaria," ben Fraj explained.

"During that time, we have licence to catch the bird using traps made of nets with a passerine serving as bait. They are only borrowed to hunt with during the season of hunting quail. It is trained for a month; then after the hunting season is over the birds are released,



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as we did.”

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Ben Fraj emphasised that falconry is a delicate art that is to be learnt under the guidance of a good falconer. He pointed out that sparrowhawks are precious birds that need to be treated carefully and preserved for future generations.

“Not everyone can train the bird. We make sure they have a mentor to help them learn...,” ben Fraj said. “We cannot accept that a person who has no prior knowledge or training acquires a licence to catch a falcon for hunting.”

At El Haouaria anyone can practice falconry if he receives the necessary training and mentoring from experienced falconers.

In addition to the Sparrowhawks Festival in El Haouaria, there was the Hunting Festival in Kelibia but shortly after the Tunisian revolution, the organisation that put on the festival was abandoned. However, hunting and heritage lovers have since launched a new youth society, the Association for the Preservation of Birds of Prey in Kelibia.



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