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The Life Cycle of Authenticity: Neo-Nomadic Tourism Culture in Kazakhstan

Abstract

The paper presents the findings related to the stages of life cycle of authenticity where Kazakhstani nomadic culture in a post-Soviet heritage evolves towards tourist consumption. Using a qualitative case study research approach, the analysis of data traces stakeholders' perception of authenticity of various elements of Kazakhstani cultural tourism. The study intertwines inextricably with the processes of authenticity, commodification and cultural change as Kazakhstani traditions have evolved to a neo-nomadic tourism culture where authenticity becomes a currency at play and a point of differentiation from other tourism destinations. The findings offer an original approach to understand the transformation of authenticity at various stages of Kazakhstani tourism development and explore how authenticity is positioned in the influx of tourists and supporting roles from local governments and organisations.

Keywords: authenticity, life cycle, neo-nomadic culture, Kazakhstan, post-Soviet heritage.

Introduction

The discourse of authenticity attracts academic debates and is fraught with contradictions that stem from a lack of a set of criteria to evaluate how 'authentic' a tourism destination is. MacCannell (2008) wittingly raises a question to the authenticity debates in tourism studies – "Why it never really was about authenticity?". The perception of a 'real' travel experience is built upon the notion of a genuine local tourism experience, which raises the issue of what is defined as authentic, original and local (Belhassen & Caton, 2006; Smith & Duffy, 2003; Yeoman, Brass, & McMahon-Beattie, 2007). However, the majority of models of authenticity portray a static representation of culture that does not take into account the complexity of contexts and is usually limited in its ability to account for the importance of developmental relationships. The desire for authentic tourism products and experiences resulting from the visitors' need for new iconic places in 'off the beaten track' tourism destinations where the consumption of culture is limited to locals and few tourists raises concerns about the authenticity of eco-cultural tourism practices. As Kazakhstan keeps defining the dynamic nature of its cultural heritage and the potential of its eco-cultural tourism practices to attract new visitors, it becomes important to define the various stakeholders' perceptions of the 'old' and 'new' authenticity as they apply to the Kazakhstani cultural heritage.

Xie and Lane (2006), propose a life cycle of authenticity for heritage destinations. The relationship between indigenous tourism and authenticity is subject to a change and potential revitalisation process ranging from the primordial state, increasing involvement, situational adaptation, revitalisation and management. The life cycle of authenticity suggests that traditional culture and arts performance are subject to change and may involve in response to both internal and external stimuli. For example, despite the fact that tourists are unlikely to have been a part of traditional societies, their mere presence is

a catalyst for sociocultural changes. Tourism culture can thus be viewed as an amalgamation of different stages within the concept of authenticity as relative rather than absolute.

This paper serves as a “test case” to apply Xie and Lane’s model to Kazakhstani nomadic culture by interviewing visitors, home-stay providers, tourism operators and governmental officials about their perceptions of authenticity of Kazakhstani cultural heritage. Although the pursuit of authentic nomadic culture is widely seen as the driving force for attracting tourists, Kazakhstan has experienced drastic changes in its cultural, economic and political situation since independence in 1991 from the former Soviet Union. In recent years, the changing aspect of the material culture in the country by various stages of touristification has transformed elements of traditional nomadic traditions into newly evolved lifestyles to become eventually a ‘neo-nomadic’ tourism culture (Tiberghien, 2016). This terminology qualifies ‘the new state of authenticity’ of the Kazakhstani cultural heritage which has endured a steady commodification process of its cultural artefacts and traditions.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, it introduces Xie and Lane’s model and its implications for indigenous tourism. Secondly, it provides a brief historic development of tourism in Kazakhstan and applies the model to each stage of tourism development, where the authenticity of nomadic culture has evolved from primordial state to renaissance. Thirdly, it strives to be a basis for a form of management tool to understand and monitor change in the context of neo-nomadic tourism culture. In following, concepts of authenticity and the research setting of Kazakhstan are detailed. The analysis of data using a case study approach is reported. Conclusions are provided in the end.

Life Cycle of Authenticity

Wallace (1956), employing an anthropologist’s approach, proposes a processual model of revitalisation movements. It portrays culture as constantly influenced by various external changes that trigger a period of revitalisation and eventually return to a new form of the cultural state. Wallace’s model consists of five stages: (1) the steady state, when cultural forces exist in a dynamic equilibrium; (2) the period of increased individual stress, when the society has been pushed out of equilibrium due to some external events; (3) the period of cultural distortion, when native cultures have been inadequately adapted; (4) the period of revitalisation, when a new plan rises to cope with distorted culture and a new culture is established with its own methods for handling change; and (5) the new steady state, where new codes are enforced and a new equilibrium evolves. The whole movements can be understood as a way of “mazeway resynthesis” (A. F. Wallace, 1956, p. 256) whereby exogenous factors, such as tourism development, may affect the indigenous culture and create a new type of performance for visitors. It is worth noting that considerations of culture in the context of sustainable development tend to relate to local communities as vulnerable and marginal (Robinson, 1999). In addition, cultural change, whether positive or negative, is frequently exhibited in the long rather than short term and is therefore difficult to measure (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Therefore, Wallace’s processual model plays a key role in understanding the evolving culture over a period of different times.

Xie and Lane (2006) draw mutually compatible ideas from Wallace (1956), Willis (1994) and Hitchcock (1999) and propose to incorporate the notion of a life cycle based on the classic S shaped product life cycle, widely accepted for most consumer products (Wilson, Gilligan, & Pearson, 1992), and adapt it to tourism destinations (Butler, 1980). The life cycle of authenticity argues that indigenous culture in tourism is subject to a change and potential revitalisation process which consists of, at least, five stages:

1. The primordial state, when cultural performance is in a primitive stage with few external influences;
2. Increasing involvement, when traditional performance is pushed out of equilibrium due to external forces, such as the development of tourism, or political pressures, or local population movements, inward or outward;
3. Situational adaptation, when indigenous culture has gone through a series of “cultural involution” (McKean, 1989, p. 126): here the forces of tourism can inject new meanings or values into current cultures, and eventually culture and tourism become inseparable;
4. Revitalisation, when indigenous culture rises to cope with stressed/distorted elements and a new culture is established with its own methods for handling change that turns the commodified arts performance into an “authentic” cultural expression. To some extent, the original meaning of culture, however defined, may have been lost;
5. Management, where new codes are introduced and a new equilibrium evolves. Conscious management in stage 5 contrasts with unmanaged organic growth in stage 1. Under management, the indigenous cultures can change further in three different ways. It may be rejuvenated to further restructure, “improve”, and make the performance “new”; it may strive to return to an earlier “authentic” stage; it may stagnate as a result of social or economic transition, and/or changes in visitors’ tastes.

Xie and Lane (2006) model has drawn attention from tourism studies as indigenous culture is increasingly viewed as fluid instead of fixed. Recent research indicates that the model presents a traceable path for tourism planning and management. For example, Fan et al (2008) suggest that the model helps better understand the creative destruction of the water town in Luzhi, China. Hall and Lew (2009) opine that the developmental life cycle is an integrated approach to manage tourism impacts, particularly, the external forces to reshape original culture. This model has expanded to various fields, ranging from ecotourism in the context of indigenous stewardship (Fennell, 2008), the touristification of colonial history (Wong, 2013), social mediation between local guides and host communities (Jensen, 2010) to rethinking of authenticity in performing heritage tourism (Zhu, 2012).

Despite the growing interest in applying the model to various situations, there is not any research attempting to discuss the nomadic culture in Central Asia. Particularly, there is scant research on Kazakhstan, the world’s largest landlocked country by land area and the ninth largest country in the world. Kazakhstan nomadic lifestyle was prevalent in the 1930s and transformed rapidly during Soviet times, which led to profound cultural and socioeconomic changes for the nomadic population. It was not until early 2000 that Kazakhstan opened its door for tourism to develop Silk Road, adventure and extreme tours (Werner, 2003). Under the influence of tourism, the authenticity of nomadic culture

has gradually shifted to a 'neo-nomadic' tourism culture that incorporate new evolved lifestyles and traditions.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper, following Xie and Lane (2006) life cycle of authenticity, is to illustrate the changing phases of Kazakhstani nomadic culture through the prism of tourism development. The discussion weaves into in-depth interviews of tourists, government officials, local home-stay providers and tourism operators to trace the evolving nomadic culture and perceptions of authenticity under the influence of tourism. The paper examines the measurement of these stakeholders' perspectives regarding their authentication positions on various topics areas related to nomadic culture. The research relates the complicated conditions and tensions that emanate from the negotiated views of what is traditional and authentic through the lenses of different stakeholders involved in the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism, a type of tourism in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create experiences for tourists (G. Wallace & Russell, 2004).

Methodology

The study followed a case-study methodology (Walle, 1997) and the Kyzylarai and the Tulip tours, respectively in central and southern Kazakhstan, provided the major source of empirical evidence for the analysis of the question of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices. Case studies can provide valuable understandings of people, events, experiences and organisations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006; Yin, 2009).

The three-day Kyzylarai tour encompassed various aspects of the remains of the nomadic culture heritage and included visits to archaeological sites from the Bronze Age, travels in the steppes landscapes and accommodation in home-stays in the Shabanbai Bi village where local population preserved the skills to produce handmade fur products and nomadic food specialities including traditional dishes made out of horse meat (*bes barmak*). Visitors are additionally offered the possibility to buy local craft-making made in fur. The three-day Tulip tour incorporated a visit to archaeological sites including petroglyphs from the middle and late Bronze Age, an exploration of the steppes and associated fauna and flora, and a visit to a camel farm where visitors are offered the opportunity to taste *shubat* (camel milk) and derived camel milk products (*kurt*) from the traditional nomadic culture. Visitors are accommodated in yurts specifically equipped with beds and in order to keep a certain level of comfort, home-stay providers offered the choice of proper sanitary conditions and toilets. Both case studies represent key eco-cultural tourism practices in the country in terms of tourism approaches and activities proposed to visitors yet involved different tourism stakeholders, who were selected through purposive and judgmental sampling.

The research includes two stages: a first qualitative exploratory stage, when the main issues in the concept of authenticity as applied to the Kazakhstani tourism market are identified; and a second qualitative stage which looks at visitors' perception of authenticity while participating in eco-cultural tours in the country. At the first stage, the study employed nineteen semi-structured in-depth interviews using open-ended questions with various tourism providers who were directly and indirectly involved with the development of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan: national and regional government

officials from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) created in 1998 and responsible to develop and promote ecotourism in the country, NGO coordinators, tourism operators and home-stay providers of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours. In order to understand the complexity of ecotourism development and nomadic culture in the country, a panel of five international and Kazakhstani academic experts selected from their publications, knowledge and expertise about sociological and anthropological aspects of nomadic culture and tourism development in Central Asia (one expert being the author of the first comprehensive cultural guide book of Kazakhstan) were contacted and additionally interviewed.

At the second stage, twenty five semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with visitors during the Kyzylarai tour in Central Kazakhstan and the Tulip tour in South Kazakhstan. Twenty nine semi-structured interviews were additionally undertaken with Free Independent Travellers (FITs) who travelled in Kazakhstan by their own means and who were intercepted by one of the researchers in Almaty. The semi-structured interviews involved questions using wordings like 'How' ("How would you define traditional nomadic culture in Kazakhstan?") but also involved questions about the rebirth of Kazakhstani nomadic culture ("Do you think there is a renaissance of nomadic culture in the country and how would you characterise it").

Analysis of data followed a qualitative data methodology. Yin (2009) argues that the examination of word tables from cross-case patterns strongly relies on argumentative interpretation. The interview transcripts were coded line by line, looking for recurrent themes. Field notes, interview transcripts, and the concurrent integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature, in particular the life cycle of authenticity model, were used to develop and refine the emergent themes. Following this approach, the researchers managed with complementary word tables to draw cross-case patterns about various stakeholders' perceptions of nomadic culture and contextualise the findings for each stage of Kazakhstani heritage tourism development. Finally, results were continuously compared with the empirical material in order to make the findings and conclusions credible.

The Primordial State

During the 1920s and 1930s, the cultural landscapes of Kazakhstan underwent tremendous processes of transformation as the people moved from pastoral nomadic activities to large-scale tilled soils (Svanberg, 1999). Most experts in nomadic culture mentioned that the transformation of traditional nomadic lifestyle in contemporary Kazakhstan makes it difficult to find "a definite authentic image of the country". Laruelle (2008) suggests that the brutal transformation of nomadic and semi-nomadic livestock breeding into an agricultural based system regulated by Soviet Union rules gave birth to a new form of transhumance pastoralism that deeply reshaped the Kazakhstani society during the second half of the twentieth century. Other experts in nomadic culture saw the evolution of Kazakhstani nomadic culture not as an immutable way of life based on its intrinsic cultural values, but rather as one based on the reintegration since the 1920-1930s of the Soviet period into the national history accounts (Massanov, Abylhojin, & Erofeeva, 2007); this latter perspective acknowledges the complexity of the reconstruction of the Kazakhstani identity and its many paradoxes in the post-Soviet era.

Despite major changes in nomadic traditions induced by the forced collectivisation during the Soviet era, Schreiber (2008) affirms former nomadic lifestyles never really disappeared. A majority of the tourism providers interviewed acknowledged that some aspects of the traditional nomadic culture, such as culinary traditions, have been preserved in the rural areas. As one expert in nomadic culture explained, “the figure of the nomad is perceived by foreigners as being tolerant, peaceful, law-abiding and living in harmony with nature.” They associate the ancestral nomadic culture with “strong family values”, “a sense of the community” and also emphasised its connectedness to “fauna, flora”. When asked more specifically about what would constitute an authentic tourism experience for a visitor in their villages, a majority of the home-stay providers mentioned the home environment, using expressions such as “be with my family” and “be in my house” to depict an authentic tourism encounter. This view was shared particularly by the director of the Kyzylarai tour who acknowledged that “the sense of hospitality” was still one of the main distinctive aspects of the traditional nomadic lifestyle.

For a majority of visitors, authenticity at the primordial state is found in the villages, and in the everyday lives of the people who are rooted in the steppes landscapes. Visitors of both Kyzylarai and Tulip tours perceived the lives of traditional nomadic families as being organised around ‘the horse culture’ as they explained horses were used as a means of transportation as well as a main source of meat for traditional horse meals, such as the *bes barmak* found in the Kyzylarai tour. For the majority of the Tulip tour clients and FITs, traditional nomadic culture in Kazakhstan is associated with mobility of housing (yurts) and an autonomous way of life. Two Tulip tourists mentioned in particular the strong family bonds and the transmission of values and knowledge from one generation to another; for example, children are educated at a very early age to breed and take care of the cattle which they thought characterised the traditional nomadic culture in Kazakhstan.

In the Kyzylarai tour, all local tourism providers said that culinary traditions remained “intact” in rural areas. In the Shabanbai Bi village, food traditions and recipes made out of horse meat for the *bes barmak* and horse milk (*kymiz*), characterising the nomadic culture, are handed down from generation to generation. Preparation of the traditional *dastarkhan* (table filled with dishes) by home-stay providers during the Kyzylarai tour allowed visitors to discover conventional ways of cooking within the village and experience an authentic meal with the local communities. For visitors who managed to share traditional dishes with the local populations, culinary traditions play a vital role in contributing to experiencing primary ethnic manifestation when visiting Kazakhstani rural villages.

Increasing Involvement

The reconstitution of national traditions and the renaissance of a local nomadic folklore have been central to the restoration of a lost identity since the independence of Kazakhstan from the Soviet Union in 1991 (Laruelle, 2008). Economic changes as well as major political events, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Summit in 2010 and international sports competitions, such as the 7th Asian Winter Games in 2011, have forced the national government to look more closely

at the development of its tourism industry. While the country hosted the 18th World Tourism Organization (WTO) assembly in the capital city Astana in 2009, government officials support the development of ecotourism as for the Minister of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “tourists nowadays seek new ideas and travel destinations, are interested in the history of nomad civilizations as well as ecological and active tourism” (Dosmukhambetov, 2009). This perspective was reinforced by several NGO coordinators and the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan, for whom “ecological tourism is considered one of the priority directions for the development of the country” (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010).

Politically, nomadic culture is perceived by government officials as a key theme in the country’s ongoing process of identity-making and place-making. For specialists in nomadic culture and a majority of government officials, the nomadic way of life and the ‘pride of being a nomad’ remain intact as a marker of the country’s identity. From a tourism marketing point of view, both tourism operators and specialists in nomadic culture believed a rebirth in traditions is necessary as it serves to validate the visitors’ romantic views of the nomadic culture and the Silk Road, as one of them detailed:

“The renaissance is necessary even though the real understanding of the nomadic culture has to be found during Soviet times. Though, there is an intense revival of our traditions for the sake of eco-tourism and ethnic tourism development in the country. This revival is mostly carried out by returning ethnic Kazakhs from China, Mongolia and Turkey.”

The development of tourism in Kazakhstan is motivated by a declining socio-economic situation in the villages due to a rapid urbanisation process since the beginning of the 1990s. The national governmental official recognises that the rebirth of nomadic culture is mostly due to “a need to preserve a declining cultural heritage, but also motivated by the perspective of additional sources of income in the most remote areas of the country.” For governmental official responsible for ecotourism development in the country, “Everything revives when linked to commercial goals.” Tourism development in Kazakhstan is seen as an opportunity to attract new investments for local development, but also as a tool to start revitalising traditional nomadic culture in the villages.

The modernisation of Kazakhstani lifestyles and international tourism development allow visitors new opportunities for discovering remains of nomadic traditions in the country. More than half of the home-stay providers from the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours mentioned that nomadic traditions are evolving. They explained that the fast assimilation of Western lifestyle standards by younger generations in the villages tend to make them forget the knowledge of their ancestors, in particular knowledge about products made from fur. One of them suggested that “people do not follow a traditional nomadic lifestyle, but get inspired by its foundations.” The commodification of traditions was witnessed particularly by tourists during special occasions that allowed visitors to experience and learn about traditional nomadic culture. A Tulip client believed that most of the commodification of cultural artefacts, such as traditional games performed specifically for visitors, is a staged spectacle intended to depict what was past local culture. For some FITs who travelled in the steppe landscapes, cultural performances encountered in the rural villages during weddings, national days (such as *Nauryz*, the

Kazakhstani New Year celebration), and traditional games such as *buzkashi* (horse-riding game) no longer exist and can be seen only during special festivals in the countryside or during special city events as a way of portraying a staged local culture for the development of tourism.

Situational Adaptation

A third of the visitors on both the Tulip and Kyzylarai tours felt that traditional Kazakh culture has disappeared. They pointed out how local communities have profoundly changed their lifestyles, often living in towns and villages and no longer moving from one dwelling to another. They believe any tourism activities will influence and change the people and their traditions with the Westernisation and transformation of their cultural habits. As one visitor on the ‘Tulip’ tour highlighted, traditional nomadic culture no longer exists since the colonisation by the Soviet people in the beginning of the 1930s, and “this culture only remains in the *memories* of old Kazakhstani people.” This statement is supported by some FITs who considered the word ‘renaissance’ was not appropriate to qualify the modernisation of the Kazakhstani society and nomadic culture. For them, Kazakhstani people did not forget their traditions but rather reinvented them with the modernisation of their country, recognising that some cultural involution is happening in the country.

A majority of FITs acknowledged there were no proper Kazakhstani nomads as such, but instead their lives were organised around different villages in rural areas. The new pastoralist system that characterises the new nomadic culture was thus perceived as an adaptation of a former traditional lifestyle but also, as one ‘Tulip’ tourist highlighted, as a political tool for the development of new eco-tourism in the country. The neo-nomadic tourism culture is seen as a reinvention of the traditional nomadic culture organised by the Kazakhstani Government for the development of tourism. For the government officials of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan is built around the renaissance of nomadic cultural traditions, and this process leads to newly defined nomadic lifestyles; for example, tourism activities in the format of yurt-camps with local communities are organised in the countryside specifically for visitors. Similarly, the yurt-camp organised in the steppes landscapes by Tulip home-stay providers is adjusted (food, levels of comfort in the yurts and proper sanitary conditions) especially for the needs of the visitors. Reconstructions of yurts for tourists are perceived of being part of the revival of the Kazakh people’s former lifestyles, but are also used as additional shelters to welcome visitors.

While half of the ‘Tulip’ tour visitors conceded the need to focus on a kind of tourism that preserved the natural environment and doesn’t change the way of life of local populations, another Tulip tourist held a different opinion and emphasised the need to balance the traditional aspects of the tourism experience with more comfort. A certain level of comfort is important for this ‘Tulip’ tourist, who stressed that some aspects of the nomadic culture may need to be revitalised and commodified in order to meet visitors’ requirements. One of the local home-stay providers during the Kyzylarai tour mentioned the possibility of organising cultural events (traditional games and cultural performances) specifically for tourists even though the events can be perceived as staged. He argued that the level of customisation of the tourism experience was dependent on visitors’

expectations and demands upon arrival in the country:

“We are ready to organise cultural events only if the visitors are asking us to do so. *Kokpar* (a traditional horse game) is organised in competitions nowadays, and we are trying to get it back to the villages for tourists.”

The situational adaptation can thus be found in the ways tourists are served in the yurts, as one Tulip client mentioned the importance of being served traditional food as a way to enhance the home-stay providers’ culture while satisfying visitors at the same time:

“Traditional horse meat culture would be more authentic to me than the Western meals we had during the tour. They do this because they try to please tourists and they are afraid that their food wouldn’t fit them. But I would like to be offered an option to eat their local food because it is a big part of their culture. If I’d like to eat Western food I would stay at home.”

One visitor on the tour also perceived cooking instruments as part of the revival of nomadic culture as “changes in nomadic traditions can also occur by a modernisation of cooking accessories and by a modernisation of the meals themselves for tourism purposes.” Modernisation is found when tourists are buying some carpets made in the village of Shabanbai Bi that follow the embroideries and ornaments from ancient times, but are now mostly made out of cotton rather than camel wool. Interestingly, the handmade craft-making production in the villages is part of the situational adaptation of the traditional Kazakh culture despite the fact that the fabrication is made on machines dating from Soviet times. New crafts in fur materials (carpets), jewellery (rings, earrings) or even toys for children are continuously reinvented for tourism purposes. Home-made souvenirs made of fur are proposed in Shabanbai Bi village as new emerging tourism arts and are specifically designed for and sold to visitors. In the Kyzylarai tour, younger generations have created *hybrid* crafts for the tourism market using fur, and created souvenirs like mobile phones sets and sleepers visitors can use in everyday life back home.

Revitalisation

It is argued (Selwyn, 1996; N. Wang, 1999) that the politics of authenticity, and representation of culture for the viewing public, influence the creation of tourism products. Nomadic culture is often seen by Western visitors as an idyllic vision of cultural mobility and lifestyle. In Kazakhstan, the dichotomy between nomadic and neo-nomadic tourism cultures finds its relevance in the views of the politics of authenticity between various stakeholders involved in the development of Kazakhstani tourism. At a broader level, Odgaard and Simonsen (2001, p. 17) propose that historically the reconstruction of Kazakhstani traditions and culture in 1991 is correlated to the need to create an independent republic:

The revival of interest in nomadic life among the Kazakhs had little to do with any desire for independence. It was more a wish to see Kazakh culture included within official Soviet accounts of their history [...]. The building of an independent

republic therefore became a matter of constructing a Kazakh national state which was founded on a reconstruction of Kazakh tradition and culture.

The reconstruction of Kazakhstani traditions is exemplified in the Tulip tour in the ways tourists are accommodated in the yurt-camp despite perceiving these tourism practises as being 'inauthentic'. A majority of 'Tulip' tourists believed that experiencing something authentic within the host-guest tourism encounter is increasingly not possible as the original meaning of traditional nomadic culture disappeared. Some FITs who had the opportunity to travel a long time in the landscapes and witness local lifestyles pointed out the need to avoid any staged activities for visitors, as one details the villages "shouldn't be open-air museums, with an actor playing a role as authenticity is lost." Some visitors on the 'Tulip' tour were much more critical about the staged parts of their tourism experience which they consider to be 'not authentic', as one of them details:

"It can't be really authentic because it is staged. But it gives you an idea of what it is like to live here, more in the environmental sense. Sleeping in a yurt, what it feels like to live in the steppes. It's as much authentic as it can be."

The yurts, which used to be the symbolic traditional shelter of former nomadic populations, are now used for ceremonies and special events such as weddings, or specifically for tourism purposes. By commodifying the yurt experience and traditional games in the villages, home-stay providers of the Tulip tour aim at creating new tourism products for local and international visitors that incorporate authentic cultural and historical elements of the traditional nomadic lifestyle. In this way, home-stay providers re-enact some aspects of their cultural heritage with the aim of giving visitors an 'authentic' portrayal of nomadic culture.

Management

The extent to which tradition is negotiable and subject to often politically motivated invention is an issue that affects the politics of authentication of eco-cultural sites in Kazakhstani rural areas. The renaissance of nomadism in contemporary Kazakhstan was argued by most of the experts in nomadic culture as being "a rebirth for the nation's identity-making" because people are no longer living a nomadic lifestyle *per se*, except in some remote areas. They further mentioned that the Kazakhstani Government is "selling nomadic aspects of the Kazakhstani culture by reconstructing an *imaginaire* of the nomad". The neo-nomadic tourism culture is thus seen as a way to validate new and unique cultural traditions of Kazakhstani populations whose ancestors were former nomads and who are now subject to globalisation processes.

At the national level, the Ministry of Tourism and Sport highly recommended the commodification of Kazakhstani cultural heritage around archaeological sites and craft-making workshops, and the Kazakhstani Government did not necessarily see the development of authentic tourism products and experiences as being the best way to increase the number of visitors in rural areas. This highlights an apparent contradiction between the goals of those developing the tourism sector and the visitors' desires for

authentic tourism experiences when coming to Kazakhstan. While the Kazakhstani Government and KTA wished to increase significantly the number of visitors in eco-cultural projects that already exist, the types of tourism products and experiences local government officials aimed to develop do not take into account the strong demand from visitors for authentic tourism experiences. By refocusing the visitor experience on core aspects of the traditional nomadic culture, the organiser of the Kyzylarai tour aims at inducing a different kind of tourism experience based on ‘authentic’ cultural artefacts (traditional nomadic food and lifestyle), be it at the expense of less comfort or ‘Europeanisation’ of the meals served to tourists.

The various levels at which the commodification of nomadic culture for tourism purposes is decided should vary according to the stakeholders involved in the process. The modernisation and ‘folklorization’ of traditional cultures when both tourism providers and visitors construct and define notions of wilderness and primitiveness through a Western lens happened when home-stay providers from the Kyzylarai tour emphasised the possibility of building reconstructed yurts, depending on the tourists’ demands:

We can build yurts for visitors next to our houses during special events like *Nauryz* (Kazakh New Year), or even do it on demand depending on what the tourists are aiming for and to what extent they want to learn about our nomadic traditions.

This opinion corroborates some the local governmental authorities who appeared to have essentialist conceptions of Kazakhstani cultural heritage when they stated that an authentic tourism experience implies reifying and staging architectural and traditional elements of nomadic culture traditions as it was before the arrival of the Soviet people in the early 1930s.

Conclusions

The Travel and Tourism Competitive Index issued by the World Economic Forum (2013) ranks Kazakhstan in the 88th position out of 139 and evaluates the number of international tourist arrivals in the country in 2011 at around 40,930 visitors, primarily looking for Silk Road, adventure and extreme tours (Werner, 2003). Although tourism is a relatively new activity, particularly ecotourism being at its infancy stage of development (Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Milne, 2015), the process of cultural change is significant. This study aims to understand the cycle of authenticity through interviewing various stakeholders involved in eco-cultural tourism development and visitors. It is argued that commodification and authenticity play a key role in authenticating cultural tourism in Kazakhstan. The various ways the Kazakhstani government wishes to frame the renaissance of nomadic culture for tourism development purposes raises an important question for the local communities: what aspects of the remnants of the former nomadic culture do local populations wish to represent as consumable tourism products for visitors?

At the beginning stage of authenticity, the images portrayed to tourists have important ethical implications for the locals themselves. Smith and Duffy (2003, p. 120) note that, “this emphasis on local exoticism can lead to inventions of traditions to satisfy external definitions of what is genuine.” By reviving certain aspects of the nomadic

culture for tourism purposes, the Kazakhstani Government wishes to portray an idealised version of the country's cultural heritage. This "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) is used to match visitors' expectations of traditional nomadic culture upon arrival in the country. In turn, the host populations may feel forced to adapt their lifestyles to ensure that tourists are not disappointed. For some organisers and home-stay providers of the 'Kyzylarai' tour, the frontier between letting things happen naturally and the commodification of human relationships is fickle and presupposes that visitors who are looking for authentic tourism experiences do not have high expectations for finding traditional aspects of nomadic culture upon arrival in the villages. Kazakhstani governmental policies for cultural evolution could focus on the revival of the nomadic culture's uniqueness and distinctiveness but without ignoring the impact of assimilation and acculturation policies inherent in the modernisation of traditional lifestyles and traditions.

Negotiated identities and cultural hybridity involving the mix of modern and traditional aspects of the nomadic culture were also favoured by a majority of Kazakhstani officials and tourism providers, who recognise the opportunities that the revival of nomadic culture can create for the development of eco-cultural tourism in rural areas. Tourism operators could, therefore, encourage home-stay providers to favour traditional nomadic culture activities with their guests as a means of enhancing visitors' perceptions of authenticity. Tourism providers also pointed out that in order to portray an accurate picture of contemporary Kazakhstani culture, visitors need to be informed in advance that the traditional nomadic lifestyle does not exist anymore and that people are no longer actually living in yurts in rural areas. By supporting a direct contact between hosts and guests in the guest houses, tourism providers and planners can minimise the risk of visitors being disappointed with their tourism experience in Kazakhstan.

The emergent 'neo-nomadic' tourism culture in Kazakhstan implies that tourism operators need to be able to ensure a certain degree of professionalisation from the home-stay providers they are working with. The increasing commodification of home-stays in the rural villages has implications for local communities and tourism providers, and it can be expected that in the future they will offer a professionalised tourism product that will see traditional nomadic hospitality evolve into a more commercial hospitality. For example, when adapting some aspects of the tourism experience by catering to the 'Tulip' tourists' desires for more comfort, the local owners are transforming their yurts into a packaged commodity (Y. Wang, 2007) or a 'front stage' (Goffman, 1967; MacCannell, 1976). The hosts are thus producing a kind of authenticity that meets some specific visitors' requirements. Authenticity is negotiated and socially constructed between the visitors and the tourism operators who offer a tourism experience that reflects the contemporary socio-cultural Kazakhstani reality, with the culture presented in the villages constantly being reinvented.

The emergence and increasing development of home-stay guest houses in the Shabanbai Bi village is one of the possible models of development for Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism that still preserves the authenticity of nomadic traditions. The commodification is seen as a way to diversify the economy from a self-sustained nomadic culture to a more professionally trained tourism culture, a development that is necessary as the country welcomes more culturally aware visitors. In Kazakhstan, the traditional nomadic sense of hospitality requires deference to the travellers who are

treated as guests. The fact that natural heritage and historical places have been preserved quite well in the ‘Kyzylarai’ tour also adds to the ‘nomadic sense of hospitality’ specific to traditional nomadic culture. The traditional nomadic way of welcoming visitors is practised by home-stay providers as a means to keep the experience authentic for tourists, and this tradition can be carefully taken into account by local tourism organisers. However, local home-stay providers could be trained by KTA, the regional governmental office and local NGOs to commodify the tradition for visitors and decide how local populations present their Kazakhstani cultural heritage. What is at stake now is the extent to which local communities have their words to say regarding tourism development.

The life cycle of authenticity applied to Kazakhstan indicates that the search for “cool” authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), original, genuine and pristine becomes a major drive for niche tourism markets. Among various destinations in Central Asia, authenticity has become the currency at play in the marketplace of cultural difference. In other words, developing ‘authentic’ tourism in Kazakhstani rural areas implies consuming nomadic symbols that are not self-produced, but instead reinvented and validated by the government but sanctioned by tour operators and local communities. Local communities will share traditional aspects of nomadic culture, including the ‘backstage’ of their lives with the visitors if the hosts see benefits coming from tourism development. The issue of authenticity is one of the important tools through which the communities harness their culture and tradition to engage in and shape their developmental direction within broader global processes. This paper has shown that in the case of Kazakhstan, understanding who drives cultural changes for future tourism development is key. Further research will be needed to understand how the process of commodification of Kazakhstani cultural heritage can contribute to reaching equilibrium between various stakeholders’ authentication positions involved in ecotourism development so that eco-cultural tourism experiences in Kazakhstan remain appealing for visitors.

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