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Authenticating Eco-cultural Tourism in Kazakhstan: A Supply Side Perspective.

The country of Kazakhstan is not a well-known tourism destination, either
globally or within Central Asia. Although the number of inbound tourists remains
relatively small, Kazakhstan possesses numerous tourism attractions based on its
past Soviet times, nomadic culture and a variety of unique landscapes. This
paper presents the findings that focus on the perceptions of authenticity of
tourism providers involved in the development of two Kazakhstani eco-cultural
tours. Empirical research is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews
conducted between August 2011 and May 2012 which were carried out with
community members, policymakers and tourism developers. Using a qualitative
case study research approach, the analysis of data identifies tourism providers'
authentication positions on various themes and indicators of authenticity for
Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism. Several topic areas including the geographical
imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), crafts purchased by tourists (nomadic
ethnic art), and performative spaces (nomadic home-stays and nomadic food) are
identified as sources of authentic tourism experiences for visitors. For each topic
area, various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity are presented. The article
examines various aspects of the commodification of nomadic culture in a post-
Soviet heritage and details the role authenticity plays in the planning and
development of Kazakhstani tourism and local community participation and
empowerment.

Keywords: Authenticity, Tourism Experience, Eco-cultural Tourism, Kazakhstan,
Supply Side.

Introduction

Questions regarding authenticity are central to literature in cultural heritage and tourism
development (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Jamal & Hill, 2004; Wang, 1999;
Xie, 2011). How tourism providers can shape the reality for tourists and provide a
depiction of the social and economic situation in the destination is becoming
increasingly important for 'off the beaten track' tourism destinations who seek to attract
visitors. Jamal and Hill (2004) argue that it is critical to place this 'authenticity' in the

context of how and why the tourism industry defines and presents its version of the genuinely local in both ecological and cultural aspects of the tourism experience. For Xie (2011, p. 32), "the significance of the debate of authentic culture depends on what Bhabha (2004) called an 'active agency', where cultural meaning should be negotiated by a variety of parties." Xie (2011, p. 37) further points out that, "it is thus important to shift the direction of research from authenticity to *authentication* and identify the positions of the stakeholders who authenticate tourism and its resources." As heritage, and the presentation of heritage, is intrinsically a contested phenomenon subject to various stakeholders' interpretations, the concept of authenticity applied to Kazakhstani cultural heritage has become particularly relevant to tourism development in the country.

Several studies have addressed the question of authenticity and the development of tourism in Asia (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2008; Kolas, 2008; Suntikul, Butler, & Airey, 2010; Werner, 2003; Xie, 2001, 2011; Xie & Wall, 2002; Yang & Wall, 2009), but the question of authenticity regarding Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices in a post-Soviet era remains unexplored. In particular, there is a need for investigation regarding how the notion of authenticity is understood, perceived and constructed by multiple stakeholders involved in the development of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan; and in what ways a deeper understanding of authenticity can be used to inform the planning and future development of Kazakhstani tourism.

This article will first review the literature pertaining to authenticity and stakeholder involvement in the development of sustainable tourism. This is followed by a description of the case studies involved in the research, before outlining the research approach for the study. The discussion then examines various aspects of the commodification of Kazakhstani nomadic culture in a post-Soviet era and discusses the

different perspectives regarding the authentication of Kazakhstani nomadic culture. Tourism management strategies and practices related to this authenticity are also considered in the discussion.

Stakeholders and dimensions of authenticity

A stakeholder is identified as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by tourism development in an area" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46) and must have a legitimate interest in the organization (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Using the "descriptive" aspect of stakeholder theory developed by Donaldson and Preston (1995) for sustainable tourism, Byrd (2007, p. 7) details that:

> "Stakeholder theory can describe the multiple elements of tourism in a community, the history of tourism development in the community, the procedures and policies that relate to the development and management of tourism in the area, the types of attractions in the community, the overall economic impact to the community, and the connections between the different agencies and organizations that are involved in tourism."

An understanding of the stakeholders' views in the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices is essential in the construction of visitors' experiences. As Xie (2011, p. 41) advocates, it becomes important to explain "how authentication is carried out as a particular culture's form of expression by institutionalising and authorising social practices and knowledge". In the Kazakhstani context, an understanding of stakeholders' authentication positions of tourism and its resources is thus warranted.

The supply side of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan comprises a range of different stakeholders including community members (home-stay providers), policymakers (government officials from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan) and tourism developers including tour operators, local and

international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The difficulty with the concept of authenticity in tourism studies is that it is a criterion used by tourists as observers but "whether the 'tourees' observed by the tourists possess such a concept and, if so, which traits of their culture they consider as authentic, is almost never raised" (Cohen, 1988, p. 374). Cultural arts and performances are also being created for the sake of tourism by the local populations which, according to Cohen (1988) participate in a form of 'cultural continuity' that the host communities totally integrate as a new form of cultural expression. Defining what is authentic – or what is not – is also highly dependent on the political context of the destination. When referring to the landscapes of Mongolia, Buckley, Ollenburg, and Zhong (2008, p. 57) argue that constructing tourism products is highly dependent on a local political willingness as "constructing tourism products based on indigenous populations' cultural landscapes may become one way for these peoples to reaffirm their own territorial and cultural identities, either for internal or for external political reasons".

For Wang (1999, p. 350), "authenticity is relevant to some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism, which involve the representation of the Other or of the past." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) describes three types of time involved in heritage tourism: 'historic time', 'heritage time' and 'visitor time'. These three categories help to situate the three dimensions of authenticity (objective, constructed and existential) from Jamal and Hill (2004, p. 358). Reisinger and Steiner (2006) and Wang (1999) state that objectivist and modernist authors argue that there is an evident, objective basis for judging authenticity. Historic time refers to the time when an object or event has been evaluated for its authenticity, typically assessed by historians, scientists or archaeologists who are evaluating the time, date and location as markers of authentication of objects of interests. Conversely, constructivists suggest that tourists'

experiences or perceptions can be authentic even when they are perfectly aware that the setting has been contrived (Cohen, 1988). Heritage time refers to the constructivist approach and relates to the meaning visitors can give to the object or event being evaluated in terms of its authenticity. At this stage, the role of both the public and private sectors shapes the heritage story and narratives of the place that are interpreted and consumed by the visitors. Some scholars have argued for a more existential approach to the question of authenticity (Hughes, 1995; N. Wang, 1999), with individuals seen as creating a sense of truth within themselves (MacLeod, 2006). For Reisinger and Steiner (2006) and Wang (1999), existential authenticity is not object based but activity based and can be divided into two dimensions: intra-personal (bodily feelings) and inter-personal (self-making). For Jamal and Hill (2004, p. 357), the visitor time can be associated with "A transcendence of time, when the tourist is aware that an event took place in another time, but is also aware of that moment's importance in relation to the tourist's own life, so that the experiential moment can be simultaneously in the past, present and even future." In this study, the examination of theoretical foundations of the concept of authenticity in cultural-heritage tourism assist in the task of defining epistemological approaches that frame the construction of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices, and help uncovering multi-dimensional indicators of authenticity for heritage and cultural tourism management in Kazakhstan that are presented later in the paper.

Research context

Although the number of inbound tourists remains relatively small, Kazakhstan possesses numerous tourism attractions based on its past Soviet times, nomadic culture and a variety of unique landscapes. Since the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, the demand for cultural heritage experiences is increasingly leading to a number of new

nature and cultural-tourism products providing local communities' perspectives in the form of 'eco-cultural' tourism, a form of tourism presented by Wallace and Russell (2004) as a concept in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create experiences for tourists. Eco-cultural tourism projects have been developed in Kazakhstan by a range of local tourism providers and promoted by national and international NGOs including the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), the Kazakh NGO 'Eco-museum Karaganda' and the governmental 'Kazakhstan Tourism Association' (KTA). Eco-sites and eco-tours with a network of home-stays were developed in Central Kazakhstan and managed by the operator, 'Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan'. One of the eco-tours and first case study of this research, the three-day Kyzylarai tour, combines different eco-cultural elements such as visits to the granite sepulchres of Begazy as well as rock paintings dating from the Bronze Age. Visitors are accommodated in home-stays in the village of Shabanbai Bi where local population have preserved the skill to produce handmade fur products and nomadic food specialities including traditional dishes made out of horse meat (*bes barmak*), local horse and camel fermented-milk products (*kymiz* and *shuba*t), which are made available to the visitors. The second case study, the three-day Tulip tour was developed in the Southern part of the country by independent tour operators including a member of KTA where visitors are accommodated in yurts specifically constructed next to the Kanshengel village. Tourists are offered the opportunity to visit archaeological sites from the Bronze Age, and an exploration of the steppes and associated flora and fauna. A visit to a camel farm where visitors are offered the opportunity to taste *shubat* (camel milk) and derived camel milk products (*kurt*) from traditional nomadic culture is also included. The tour is designed for visitors who want an experience in sleeping in a yurt. In order to keep a certain level of comfort, home-stay providers offered visitors the

choice of sleeping in beds or on *körpe*s (traditional mattresses on the floor), as well as proper sanitary conditions and toilets.

Methodology

Rickly-Boyd (2012, p. 274) argues that "while there are clearly multiple ontological and epistemological perspectives of authenticity, few researchers use only one paradigm." Rickly-Boyd discusses that when analysing the authenticity of a tourism experience, one has to consider the strong interaction between object, site and experience, which are not mutually exclusive. Relativist ontology assumes that realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Because the study also includes "tourists and residents who engage in sense-making, narrative and interpretive meaning-making encounters with situated place and contextual space" (Jamal & Hill, 2004, p. 21), this research is predominantly situated in a "constructivist/interpretivist thought and practice" (Hollinshead, 2006, p. 43) that is grounded in an "essentially relativist" ontology (Chambers, 2007, p. 109) and a subjectivist epistemology (the research views reality as subjective and constructed by the individuals involved in the research process) (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In regards to the different epistemological and philosophical positions that have a stake in the conceptualisation of authenticity, the study adopted a constructivist paradigm as a managerially more adequate position. In particular, the constructivist paradigm was appropriate for uncovering the managerial implications of the process of commodification of Kazakhstani cultural heritage. The purpose of this study is not only to describe what was experienced by various tourism providers but also to understand how their perception of authenticity of the Kazakhstani Soviet and post-Soviet heritage

is understood and constructed as a factor influencing the development of eco-cultural tourism in the country. The researchers thus elaborated around a central phenomenon which included the concept of authenticity in tourism studies, causal conditions, strategies for eco-tourism development, the Kazakhstani socio-cultural context and consequences for the local tourism industry.

Phillimore and Goodson (2004, p. 3) argue that qualitative methods are employed "to collect data about activities, events, occurrences and behaviours and to seek an understanding of actions, problems and processes in their social context." Tourism knowledge gathering has been generally characterised by case studies, area-specific discussions, examples of best practices, and one-off or one-time research (Hall, Williams, & Lew, 2004). Case studies seek to undertake in-depth analysis of single cases or multiple cases and develop themes, assertions and explanations specific to the cases, which are bounded by time and place (Creswell, 1998). Case studies provided the major source of empirical evidence for the analysis of the question of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices. The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling than using a single case, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Yin, 2009). More importantly, the analytic benefits from having two cases may be substantial (Yin, 2009, p. 61). After one of the researcher met with various stakeholders (community members, policymaker and tourism developers) involved in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism in the country during the first international ecotourism conference held in Central Kazakhstan in August 2010, a multiple-stakeholder approach was chosen to understand the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism. During the conference, the Kyzylarai tour in Central Kazakhstan and the Tulip tour in the southern part of the country were chosen as sources of empirical evidence for the study. Both tours included archaeological sites from the Bronze Age

and encompassed various aspects of the remains of nomadic culture heritage, including travelling in the landscape of the steppes, eating local food with home-stay providers and being offered to buy local craft-making. Both case studies represent key eco-cultural tourism practices but offered contrasting situations in terms of research setting and organisation of the tour.

Due to the recent development of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours (launched in July 2010 and May 2012, respectively), the researchers had limited available information about the population from which the sample would be taken. Therefore, purposive or judgmental sampling method was used in order to select unique cases that were especially informative about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Kazakhstan; this sampling method is preferred in situations when an expert uses judgment in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2009). The multi-stakeholder approach allowed the researcher to interview all the different groups of populations involved in the development of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours. After a phase of data collection in Central Kazakhstan with the Kyzylarai tour in August 2011, the researcher embarked on the Tulip tour in South Kazakhstan in May 2012; collecting data from a second tour expanded the sample of stakeholders. Nineteen semi-structured in-depth interviews using open-ended questions were conducted between August 2011 and May 2012 with various stakeholders who were directly or indirectly involved with the development of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours including local government officials, tourism operators, home-stay providers and NGO coordinators. Notes were taken throughout the one hour long interviews and reviewed to draw out key themes.

An analytical mode of generalisation was chosen due to the ability to enrich the results about the variation of the perception of authenticity in eco-cultural tours. Following Yin's (2009) approach that the examination of word tables from cross-case

patterns relies on argumentative interpretation, the interview transcripts were coded line by line to look for recurrent themes which were developed and refined with the integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature. Analyses and interpretations were contextualised by describing the various stakeholders being interviewed, by explaining the Kazakhstani context, and by highlighting the infancy stage of eco-cultural tourism development in the country. Some questions used in semi-structured interviews ("What is your definition of an authentic tourism experience?", "How would you characterise contemporary nomadic culture in Kazakhstan?") involved rich and complex answers from the participants. Multiple iterations of coding were used to confirm the validity of the data analysis. The researchers managed with complementary word tables to draw cross-case patterns about different stakeholders' perception of authenticity regarding eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan, and themes were then constantly compared and checked against the empirical material in order to make the findings and conclusions credible.

Research findings

Several themes including the geographical imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), crafts purchased by tourists (nomadic ethnic art), and performative spaces (nomadic home-stays and nomadic food) are highlighted by tourism providers as sources of authentic tourism experiences for visitors. For each theme, various stakeholders' authentication positions are now presented.

Nomadic cultural landscapes

In their study about cultural landscapes in Mongolian tourism, Buckley, Ollenburg and Zhong (2008, p. 48) define the term cultural landscape as being intricately entwined with the populations who inhabit them:

A cultural landscape is an area where the landforms have been created by human culture as well as by nature; human culture has been created by the landscapes as well as the people; and each now depends upon and continues to exist because of the other.

Cultural landscapes (steppes) and the different meanings and symbolic aspects of the Kazakhstani flora and fauna are seen to be essential elements to portraying an authentic tourism experience. One of the NGO coordinators emphasised the need to "combine natural sights with ethnical, historical and cultural features". According to the employees of 'Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan', the flora and fauna of the steppes are considered as key elements in portraying an authentic image of nomadic culture. This view is shaped by local home-stay providers, for whom their association with the steppes includes "wild nature", "unspoilt and unique landscapes", "natural sightseeing" and "diversity of deserts, mountains and pine forests". Archaeological sites encountered during the tours (ancient stone carvings, or petroglyphs) are perceived by operators of both tours to have a "true authentic meaning" and are highlighted as a cultural component in the eco-tours. The archaeological site of Begazy, which is included in the Kyzylarai tour, offers a unique opportunity for visitors to witness an ancient 'authentic' historical site from the Bronze Age. Similarly, the Tulip tour encompasses the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tamgaly, where petroglyph*s* from the Bronze Age can be found. These sites are acknowledged by all tourism stakeholders as depicting an 'objective' ancient nomadic way of life for visitors, or the visitors concept 'historic time' as described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998).

The Kazakhstani landscapes provide a 'feeling of being a nomad' and are a symbolic depiction of an authentic element to the visitor's tourism experience. The transcendence of time associated with the visitors' gaze of the steppes refers to what N. Wang (1999, p. 355) calls "the authenticity of the origins felt by the visitors and

correspondingly to the authenticity projected onto toured objects by tourists and tourism producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences and beliefs." One of the home-stay providers from the village of Shabanbai Bi specifically emphasised the mystery of the inhabited steppes for some international visitors, as "upon arrival, visitors have romantic and idealised views of traditional Kazakhstani nomadic culture, typically steppes landscapes and mobile dwellings (yurt-camps)." NGO coordinators suggest that the Kazakhstani cultural landscapes often constitute the main authentic aspect of the visitor experience. From a more pragmatic perspective, NGO coordinators encourage the need to (re)connect Kazakhstani semi-nomadic people and visitors with traditional nomadic lifestyles by using cultural landscapes as an "additional component in the tourism adventure". They highlight that, in particular, this connection gives visitors the possibility to travel in cultural landscapes on horseback and experience, upon availability, a yurt nomadic shelter with the local population, and therefore "meet visitors' expectations about traditional nomadic culture".

Nomadic ethnic art

In the village of Shabanbai Bi, most of the home-stay providers are ready to offer handmade fur crafts in the form of *kilims* and *körpes* (carpets) and *tapochkis* (slippers), depending on tourist demand. The workshop on fur production organised by tourism operators and NGO coordinators in the village of Shabanbai Bi highlights the importance of genuine fur craft-making for the local population. Fur craft-making represents the heritage of the material and spiritual culture of the tribes who inhabited the Great Kazakh steppes in ancient times. Its development is closely connected to the nomadic characteristics of the traditional social and economic aspects of the Kazakh society as Kazakh lifestyle was mostly defined by folk craft and trade.

The souvenirs are individually produced by local villagers who sell a range of hand-crafted items that are sometimes exclusively designed for the needs of the visitors. Craft-making, according to Littrell et al. (1993) have indicators of authenticity. This is similar to the Kazakh context whereby external criteria (aesthetics, production techniques or time/place of manufacture) and internal criteria (whether crafts are appealing or useful when they arrive home) are found to be important markers of authenticity. The makers of souvenirs argue some carpets made in the village of Shabanbai Bi are still objectively authentic, incorporating the embroideries and ornaments from ancient times, even if they are now mostly made out of cotton rather than camel wool. Depending on the tourists' demand, home-stay providers in the Shabanbai Bi village offer to make either traditional or new crafts out of fur materials. Thus new crafts in fur materials (carpets), jewellery (rings, earrings) or even toys for children are continuously reinvented for tourism purposes and plays a significant part in the revival of the traditional Kazakh culture despite the fact that the fabrication is made on machines dating from Soviet times.

Performative Spaces: Nomadic home-stays

The notion of eco-cultural tourism and authenticity is important for the tours because most of the villages in Kazakhstan are largely physically unchanged since the 1930s. Contrary to the open-air museums developed by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Kazakhstan at the sites of Balkash Lake and Burabai in Central Kazakhstan, the village of Shabanbai Bi is not specifically organised to welcome visitors. From the point of view of the home-stay providers and the Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan operator, there are no special activities such as traditional cultural performances organised for visitors to portray Shabanbai Bi as a 'typical' Kazakhstani village. The Shabanbai Bi and Kanshengel villages, visited on the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours, respectively, are not

considered by NGO coordinators and tourism operators as 'folk' villages, although authenticity is perceived differently by the home-stay providers in them. While the tourism operators see Shabanbai Bi village as objectively authentic, Kanshengel village is perceived as being staged for the sake of tourism. Home-stay providers emphasise that the visitors' stay in the guest houses, where they share a 'nomadic lifestyle' and interact with the local population, and that this can potentially enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience.

Home-stays, offered in yurts next to the Kanshengel village during the Tulip tour and in traditional guest houses in the village of Shabanbai Bi during the Kyzylarai tour were interpreted in various ways by the stakeholders. As yurts are part of both the nomadic lifestyle and visitors' perceptions of traditional nomadic culture before arriving in the country, some home-stay providers mention the need to reconstruct traditional yurts as a means to augment the perceived authenticity of the visitors' experience. This 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 concept of 'pseudo-events' or superficial and manufactured tourism experiences, as described by Boortsin (1964), finds some relevance in the Shabanbai Bi village when some Kyzylarai home-stay providers suggest the possibility of accommodating tourists in reconstructed yurts, a form of accommodation that has normally disappeared from rural villages. In the Kyzylarai tour, visitors are welcome to spend their time with their hosts in the guest houses, but some home-stay providers emphasised the possibility of building reconstructed yurts, depending on the tourists' demands. Here, the constructivist approach that relates to the meaning visitors can give

to the object or event being evaluated in terms of its authenticity becomes important in both tours.

In the case of Shabanbai Bi village, relationships are developed between the local population and visitors when the visitors are invited to share a meal in the villagers' houses. Cross-cultural understandings between tourists and home-stay providers are favoured during evening meals at the guest houses in the form of a 'family feeling', where the level of intimacy between visitors and the host community members is high. The way Kazakhstani home-stay providers have organised the daily sites visits and the guest houses chosen to welcome visitors tends to favour intimacy between hosts and guests, and such a degree of intimacy is required if visitors are to fully appreciate the complexities of Kazakhstani eco-cultural heritage. The type of comfort expected in the Tulip tour clearly highlights antithetic aspects associated with the authenticity of the tourism experience: How to experience a traditional nomadic lifestyle without changing its meaning, for example by augmenting the level of comfort, is an interesting aspect. As one Kyzylarai tour home-stay provider mentioned, "Yurts with solar panels, TV and fridges are part of local people everyday life, but it also allows us to cater [for] the needs of our visitors, especially more comfort for older tourists." However, tourism providers do not see a certain level of customising the experience to meet tourists' demands for comfort as something that would lower their guests' perceptions of authenticity.

Performative Spaces: Nomadic food

All tourism providers interviewed mentioned that culinary traditions remain "intact" in rural areas and the traditional table filled with dishes (*dastarkhan)* is perceived as objectively authentic. In Shabanbai Bi village, food traditions and recipes using horse meat (*bes barmak*, *kuyrdak*) and horse milk (*kymiz*) are acknowledged by home-stay

providers to to have been handed down through the generations. The national dishes *bes barmak* and *kymiz* are served for visitors without any changes to the recipes during the Kyzylarai tour. One of the home-stay providers in the village of Shabanbai Bi observed:

> "Our cuisine is very rich and national traditional food is the best expression of our culture; especially the way we are preparing horse meat and dairy products derived from horse milk. Moreover, the food we are serving for the visitors is the same as what we are eating ourselves."

Conversely, the yurt-camp organised in the steppes landscapes in South Kazakhstan for the Tulip tour is adjusted (food, levels of comfort in the yurts and proper toilets) especially for the needs of the visitors. The operators realise, however, that these adjustments may not entirely satisfy visitors:

> "For this tour at first we have tried to meet the needs of Western tourists, by offering them popular Western dishes. But this year we slightly changed the direction and moved towards more traditional cuisine. And this is the first time we are cooking food outdoors."

In both cases, and despite a Westernisation of local food prepared by the organisers of the Tulip tour, the tourism operators clarified that the authentic part of the tourist experience can be found in *sharing* traditional meals prepared by the host populations in the villages. The traditional *dastarkhan* prepared by the home-stay providers allows visitors to discover the conventional ways of cooking within the village and experience an 'authentic meal' with the local population. Thus, the impression of a genuine tourism experience is given by home-stay providers through culinary aspects of their cultural heritage, in particular when the visitors are given the possibility to participate in the preparation of the meals and have the recipes and experiences explained by the tourism operator or guides of the tours. The opportunity to be part of the cooking experience is

provided spontaneously by home-stay providers as part of their daily lives in the villages. As tourists involved in active participation rather than observation are more likely to experience a sense of existential authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007), the intimate experience of sharing local culinary knowledge in villages or in yurts is perceived as an 'authentic encounter' by the majority of the home-stay providers, who explained that they do not need to stage the cooking of the meals specifically for visitors.

Discussion

Using a qualitative case study research approach, the study details that three themes authenticated by tourism providers can contribute to an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for visitors: the geographical imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), crafts purchased by tourists, and performative spaces (nomadic home-stays and nomadic food). The research shows that almost all the stakeholders involved in the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism emphasise the importance of ecological and cultural aspects in the visitor experience. For tourism providers, cultural landscapes and culinary traditions often constitute the main aspect of authenticity of the tourism experience being offered to visitors. While a majority of the home-stay providers emphasise the importance of nature and culture preservation, NGO coordinators highlight the notion of authenticity as being a unique and important feature associated with eco-cultural tourism practices and tours offered in the country. For government officials, a rebirth of nomadic traditions is necessary for tourism development purposes as it contributes to validate the visitors' romantic views of the nomadic culture and the Silk Road. Suppliers of tourism experiences in the Tulip tour conceptualise and shape the tourism experiences made available to visitors by supporting the commodification of some aspects of the Kazakhstani nomadic culture. In the Kyzylarai tour, some home-

stay providers mentioned the need to reconstruct traditional elements of the nomadic culture shelters as a way to augment the perceived authenticity of the visitors' experiences. The organisation of staged yurt villages in the steppes is paramount to creating the 'feeling of being a nomad', a romantic view and representation by the visitors of the traditional nomadic culture. Despite a Westernisation of local food prepared by the organisers of the Tulip tour, the tourism operators clarified that the authentic part of the tourist experience can be found in the sharing of traditional meals prepared by the host populations in the villages. Authenticity is thus negotiated and socially constructed between the tourism operators and home-stay providers who offer a tourism experience that reflects the contemporary socio-cultural Kazakhstani 'reality'. While a majority of home-stay providers perceive cultural landscapes and culinary traditions as being objectively authentic, they perceive contemporary nomadic craft-making as a way of reviving the traditional Kazakh culture when the crafts are bought by the tourists.

A key managerial contribution of this research is the role authenticity plays in the planning and development of Kazakhstani tourism and local community participation and subsequent sense of empowerment. Wallace and Russell (2004, p. 236) argue that "eco-cultural tourism acts as a model for how cultural and eco-tourism could be employed by local people to build an empowered, sustainable future in similar settings." For Byrd (2007, p. 7) "sustainable tourism cannot be achieved if imposed without regarding the stakeholders' interests". Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher (2005) and Jamal and Getz (1995) emphasised the importance of collaboration with stakeholders in shaping tourism development, implying that consideration should be given to each stakeholder group without one being given priority over others. According to Xie (2011, p. 185), allowing local communities to present their own culture themselves, without

intermediaries being involved, "can lead to a better tourism experience and create additional employment opportunities for minority people." As Kazakhstani cultural landscapes have a strong significance to local populations, one of the ways to raise awareness of the cultural values of such sites is by empowering the local populations to provide stories about the places while tourists are in their guest houses. Explaining the cultural meanings behind traditional dishes or traditional artefacts, home-stay providers can communicate local stories that are perceived as 'genuinely' authentic by visitors. The Tulip and Kyzylarai tours offer different levels of commodification of cultural heritage and, more importantly, different tourism product offerings that reflect the organisers' different views on eco-cultural tourism development. While home-stay providers on the Kyzylarai tour are given more freedom and empowerment by the tour organisers to interact with tourists in Shabanbai Bi village, the tourism experience in Kanshengel village is more controlled by the Tulip tour organiser who offers a commodified version of the nomadic culture that limits contact and discussion between hosts and guests. Principles of tourism reciprocity imply that local communities will share traditional aspects of nomadic culture with the visitors when the hosts see benefits coming from tourism development. However, as Prideaux and Timothy (2008, p. 11) maintain, "The power of tourism operators to select which attractions are patronised can sometimes result in a power transfer from the local community to commercial interests." While the Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan operator allows the home-stay providers in Shabanbai Bi village to interact and organise the catering freely with their guests, Tulip home-stay providers are guided by the tour organiser, who frames the tourists' experience in the Kanshengel village. The structure of this second tour means that it is the tourism operator who determines how the families present authentic aspects of their cultural heritage, rather than the decisions coming from the local communities

themselves. This has resulted in some of the 'authentic' aspects being staged to meet the desires of the visitors; for example, the re-building of yurts with higher levels of comfort next to the home-stays in Shabanbai Bi village. By explaining to home-stay providers what the key contributing elements of a visitor's authentic experience are, tourism organisers, in collaboration with government officials and NGO coordinators, can frame the boundaries of the tourism products and experiences made available to the visitors in a way that they feel is a genuine Kazakhstani cultural heritage. By helping to foster the network of home-stays in rural villages and identify the souvenir production of traditional handicrafts, local NGOs participate in the authentication and design of eco-cultural tours that can meet visitors' expectations of authenticity when travelling in the country. The governmental Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) who already holds seminars for local communities to acquaint them with visitors' expectations has thus a determinant role to play in understanding the local populations' views and the development of future tourism products that take into account the visitors' expectations of nomadic traditions. A higher involvement by the local communities as to how they engage with visitors and in the eco-cultural tourism development of their villages would meet visitors' demand for authentic tourism experiences even if, as one home-stay provider said, "It implies rebuilding yurts in the villages." The organisation of staged yurt villages in the steppes is paramount to creating the 'feeling of being a nomad', a romantic view and representation by the visitors of the traditional nomadic culture.

The various levels at which the commodification of nomadic culture for tourism purposes is decided varies according to the stakeholders involved in the process. The local authorities appear to have essentialist conceptions of Kazakhstani cultural heritage, stating 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. 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 (Tiberghien & Xie, 2016). Kazakhstani governmental policies for cultural evolution should 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 are also favoured by 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 the country. 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 of Kazakhstani nomadic culture can be 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 if the country is to welcome more culturally aware visitors.

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