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# **Neo-nomadic Culture as Territorial Brand for Authentic Kazakhstan Tourism Development**

The article explores the concepts of authenticity and neo-nomadic culture as territorial brands for Kazakhstan tourism development. Using a qualitative case study methodology based on two eco-cultural tours, the article examines stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity of several aspects of nomadic culture and how they intersect with the notion of 'terroir'. The paper argues that constructing authentic tourism products and experiences based on contemporary Kazakhstani nomadic culture and traditions enable local stakeholders to reaffirm their territorial and cultural identities in the post-Soviet era, foster international recognition of authentic eco-cultural tourism practices and differentiate Kazakhstan from similar tourism destinations in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Territorial Brand, Authenticity, Neo-nomadic Culture, Tourism development, Kazakhstan.

## **Introduction**

Pastoral nomadism emerged in the central steppe areas 'as crucial to the maintenance of a nomadic economy' (Khazanov, 1990, p. 88). The nomadic lifestyle and cultural landscapes of Kazakhstan that were prevalent in the beginning of the 1930s transformed rapidly during Soviet times, leading to profound cultural and sociological changes for the nomadic populations (Olcott, 1981) who were forced to move from pastoral nomadic activities to agrarian and industrial lands (Nurmukhamedov, Savosko, & Suleimenov, 1966; Svanberg, 1999), a time when the Kazakh population in Kazakhstan grew very slowly (Bekmakhanova, 1980). The sedentarisation of nomadic populations induced by the agricultural based system regulated by the forced collectivisation during the Soviet era resulted in a new form of pastoralism that deeply transformed the nomadic traditions (Laruelle, 2008; Vuillemenot, 1994). Yet, on a broader level, Odgaard and Simonsen (2001) argue that historically the reconstruction of Kazakhstani

traditions and culture since the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991 is correlated to the need to create an independent Kazakh national state. The complex evolutionary process of the Kazakhstani culture between the reconstitution of national traditions and local nomadic folklore, as well as the reintegration of the Soviet period into the national history accounts into the reconstruction of the Kazakhstani identity, answers for the complexity of the Kazakhstani nation branding (Marat, 2009; Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Ashirbekova, 2013) and its numerous paradoxes in the post-Soviet era (Laruelle, 2008; Massanov, Abylhojin, & Erofeeva, 2007; Olcott, 1995).

Schreiber (2008) affirms nomadic lifestyles never really disappeared as since the end of the Soviet period the nomadic way of life has demonstrated its ability to support life at a time of material penury and difficult self-discovery for the Kazakhs. For Schreiber (2008, pp. 90, 91), the transhumance movements characterising nomadic migrations in Kazakhstan evolved to semi-nomadism with the acceleration of sedentarisation of former nomadic populations in the villages during winter time:

The yurt, in some places preserved with much care, has regained its place of honour. Knowledge about the weather, the characteristics of plants, water and animals are once again being applied [...]. Nomadic migrations are no longer exceptional, and in summer you can find mobile nomads' settlements called *zhaylau* in many steppe valleys and mountain pastures [...]. In winter camps, called *kystau*, things have changed slightly from a century ago, with herdsmen now living in huts or houses in most cases supplied by electricity [...]. These communities of herdsmen, who during the warm season follow the food and water with their herds, but in winter occupy fixed dwelling places, are called semi-nomads.

Hence, with the nomadic cycle of seasons enduring changes due to the rapid modernisation of the country (Kunanbaeva, 2008), the changing aspect of the material culture in Kazakhstan has transformed elements of the traditional nomadic culture into new evolved lifestyles and traditions.

As heritage is inherently a contested phenomenon, especially when communities are comprised of multiple ethnic groups, belief systems, cultures and social norms, the concept of authenticity and its management applied to cultural heritage in Kazakhstan has become particularly relevant to the specialists of cultural and sustainable tourism development in the country (Tiberghien, 2018). Using the symbolic importance of Tamgaly petroglyphs as a Kazakhstani nomadic grazing site connecting the important aspects of life from subsistence practices to spirituality, Yespembetova (2005, p. 16) argues landscape and tourism intersect in Kazakhstan as a mean to promote place uniqueness and differentiation, ‘as the country aims at developing a unique, post-colonial identity from its Soviet, Turkic and Kazakh heritage’. For Yespembetova, Rickly, and Braverman (2008, p. 128) ‘Kazakhs have a national identity that is geographically contextualised to Central Asia but historically and ancestrally national tied to the nomadic lifestyle’. They argue in particular that the symbolic importance of nomadic sites and culture can be used to re-enact the unique national identity from under the Soviet Union rule. As Kazakhstan keeps defining the dynamic nature of its nomadic cultural heritage and the potential of its eco-cultural tourism practices to attract new visitors (Tiberghien, 2014, 2016), it becomes important to define the various stakeholders’ perceptions of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ authenticity as they apply to the Kazakhstani nomadic culture and heritage.

### **Authenticity, tourism and neo-nomadic culture**

Much of the debate surrounding authenticity and tourism evolves around the question of what can be authentic. Prideaux and Timothy (2008) argue that the changing aspect of the material culture with time ultimately creates a new authenticity. The explanatory model below (Figure 1), adapted to the Kazakhstani context, details the

commodification processes resulting from the growing number of visitors that influence cultural change and the authenticity of cultural products.

Figure 1

The desire for new authentic tourism products is explained in the above model as being the result of 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.

Tiberghien and Xie (2018) defined in particular the '*neo-nomadic tourism culture*' terminology to qualify 'the new state of authenticity' of the Kazakhstani cultural heritage which has endured a steady commodification process of its cultural landscapes, artefacts and traditions for the sake of tourism development. In line with the framework of Prideaux and Timothy's model (2008), various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity as they relate to nomadic culture, territorial brands and Kazakhstan tourism development were considered in this paper.

### ***Nomadic cultural landscapes as living heritage***

Crouch (2000) argues that from a geographical perspective, it is important to consider the situated place and space in which the object is experienced. For residents, the landscape 'may be one associated primarily with work and everyday living, whereas for visitors it may be a landscape of pleasure experienced in a brief sojourn' (Wall & Ringer, 1998, p. 51). According to Carr (2008, p. 36), cultural landscapes are regarded as 'being human constructions resulting from peoples' relationships to the natural areas within which they live or move'. As a marker of evidence created through the interaction of human activity, cultural and historical agency where past and present meet, Rössler (2006) argues cultural landscapes are fundamentally linked to local communities, their heritage and the natural environment in which they are embedded.

Taylor (2009, pp. 12,13) further discusses that the nexus between identity, landscape and connection with people where past and present meet is central to understanding cultural landscapes as living history and as part of national identities:

‘It is the places, traditions, and activities of ordinary people that create a rich cultural tapestry of life, particularly through recognition of the values people attach to their everyday places and concomitant sense of place and identity’.

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 so that from a tourism perspective, culture and scenery are closely combined in the expectations and the perceptions of locals and tourists alike and therefore ‘as an attraction, a cultural landscape is a place where the setting would not look the same without the culture, and the latter would not look the same without the landscape’. Buckley et al. (2008) exemplify in particular that Mongolian cultural landscapes consist of four main elements – steppes, herds, horses and yurts – and the local population are characterised by nomadic pastoralists who rely on their horses to move their flocks and herds across the great grassland steppes and carry their mobile yurts dwellings.

Constructing tourism products based on cultural landscapes is additionally highly dependent on a local political willingness and their relationship with local communities, and the extent to which they are proud of their heritage. The understanding of cultural landscapes also depends on the tourists themselves (Milne, Grekin, & Woodley, 1998) and how individuals perceive the intrinsic nature of the landscapes and associated cultural values. Müller and Pettersson (2001, p. 8) explain for example that the depiction in tourists brochures of the Sami’s nomadic lifestyle in northern Sweden is closely connected to the promotion of the area as ‘Europe’s last

wilderness'. Promoting and developing the positioning of a tourism destination and develop its brand identity on the international tourism market can involve multiple strategies in which nomadic cultural landscapes can play a central role.

### **Authenticity and territorial brands for tourism development**

Measuring and defining the competitiveness of a destination can be complex, especially when determining the factors influencing the country's competitiveness (Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007). Courlet (2008) argues the local level (the territory) is one of the most important determinant for a country's competitiveness. Following the recent increasing concern about the sustainability of natural, economic and cultural resources (Kozak & Nield, 2004) in shaping destination competitiveness, territorial brands are a particular type of brand that emphasise 'the link between place branding and sustainable tourism development with a focus on ecotourism and on the use of local products for tourism development' (Lorenzini, Calzati, & Giudici, 2011, p. 541).

Territorial brands can be used as means of promoting the territory as tourist destination and increase the width and reputation of companies selling local products (Neto, 2007).

In their work about the use of territorial brands for tourism development on the March region, Lorenzini, Calzati and Giudici (2011, p. 541) discuss a brand is considered as referring to a territory 'when applied to a specific geographic area or its products rather than to a single firm; when is used by a multiplicity of different stakeholders; when is linked to the historical, cultural, environmental or social conditions of an area; and when it conveys a sense of quality and authenticity'. They additionally emphasise that territorial brands can convey a sense of authenticity when linked to the quality and typicality of the product representative of rural traditions and a strong commitment of the local community to the material and immaterial culture of the place. In their research about Kazakhstan destination competitiveness, Baisakalova and

Garkavenko (2015) show that some of the main contemporary issues and challenges the Kazakhstani industry faced was about developing competitive tourism clusters in different regions of the country, and that one of the prospects for future tourism development is about developing tourism in rural areas, which is seen as having great potential for authentic cultural tourism development.

Equally, the significant drivers of tourism development are not necessarily linked to the territorial brands, but rather the presence of noteworthy heritage and integrated system of supply (Lorenzini et al., 2011). Ascribing meanings and associations to a place and to the territory conceived as ‘terroir’ is a complex mix that comprises natural, cultural and social specificities of the territory and how they intertwine with the social capital and activities of local community (Bowen & Zapata, 2009). The emphasis on ‘localness’ and the cultural concept of ‘terroir’ is based on quality origin labelled products and genuine value of certified heritage sites conveying an authentic sense of place and community values as tools for local development (Bessière, 1998; Bowen & Zapata, 2009). This perspective was reflected by studies undertaken in Kazakhstan (Tiberghien, Bremner, & Milne, 2018; Tiberghien et al., 2013; Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Milne, 2015) about the planning of authentic tourism in the country which detailed that three themes authenticated by tourism providers can contribute to an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for visitors: the geographical imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), performative spaces (nomadic food and nomadic home-stays) and nomadic ethnic art. As intermingling themes being associated with the perceived authenticity of Kazakhstani territories and tourism encounters, they jointly conveyed a sense of authenticity strongly rooted in how local communities could provide authentic tourism encounters based on their ‘terroir’ and local traditions.

## **Methodology and research locations**

Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Stake, 1995). The ‘Kyzylarai’ tour in Central Kazakhstan and the ‘Tulip’ tour in South Kazakhstan served as case studies through which to evaluate stakeholders’ perceptions of authenticity of various elements of Kazakhstani cultural heritage tourism. Both tours included archaeological sites from the Bronze Age and encompassed various aspects of the remains of the nomadic culture heritage.

Central Kazakhstan (Karaganda region) is also known as ‘The Heart of Kazakhstan’, and has an area of 398,800 square kilometres. Central Kazakhstan is a land of ancient nomadic civilizations, boundless steppe expanses and natural diversity. Since ancient times, these lands have been known by their poetic name, Sary-Arka. The mountains of Central Kazakhstan (Karkaraly, Ulytau, Kyzylarai, Bulygyl and others) are noticeable because of their “clean lakes, fresh pine air and unique wildlife and have always played an important role as signposts for travellers along the Silk Road as an oasis for rest and recuperation” (ETPACK, 2010). The Kyzylarai tour was developed by the members of the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project and was one of the first community-based eco-tours in Central Kazakhstan promoted by national and international organisations. The three-day Kyzylarai tour combined a visit to the granite sepulchres of Begazy and rock paintings dating from the Bronze Age, stone statues of the Turkic period, and mausoleums of the period of the Kazakh-Jungar wars dating from the eighteenth century. The tour started from the city of Karaganda and headed to Aktogai (250 kilometres, 3.5 hours) where an excursion to the local archaeological and ethnographical museum was organised. The tour then continued for 40 kilometres (1 hour) from Aktogai to Shabanbai Bi village

where visitors were welcomed in the guest houses. The third day of the tour comprised the visit of Shabanbai Bi village and going back to Karaganda city.

The three-day Tulip tour was organised by a member of KTA who was also a professional guide and author of a cultural guide book about Kazakhstan. The tour departed from Almaty and travelled 80 kilometres south to see the petroglyphs from the middle and late Bronze Age at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Tamgaly. After 80 kilometres in the steppes, the bus reached the Kanshengel village, where several yurts were installed and equipped with beds (instead of traditional felt mattresses, *körpes*), proper sanitary conditions and Europeanised meals specifically for visitors. The second day of the tour comprised an exploration in the steppes landscapes where fauna and flora (particularly special flowers and plants species) were identified by the organiser of the tour and a visit to a camel farm where visitors were offered the opportunity to taste dairy products from the traditional nomadic culture. The third day consisted of having breakfast in the yurt allocated for guests and going back to Almaty.

The interpretative paradigm supports the belief that reality is constructed by subjective perception and predictions cannot be made (Littlejohn, 2000). As the proposed research focused on the social construction of meaning, the researcher adopted a constructivist/interpretive research position to interview various stakeholders. In this way, the researcher emphasised the significance of context in understanding various stakeholders' positions in the study. It was thus important for the study to understand all stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity of the Kazakhstani tourist space and cultural heritage.

Unique respondents that were especially informative about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Kazakhstan were selected using a purposive or judgmental sampling approach preferred in situations when an expert uses judgment in

selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2009). The study employed nineteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with various stakeholders involved with the development of the ‘Kyzylarai’ and ‘Tulip’ tours including local government officials, tourism operators, home-stay providers, NGO coordinators and academic experts in nomadic culture. Twenty-five qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken with visitors during the ‘Kyzylarai’ tour and the ‘Tulip’ tour. A further twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Free Independent Travellers (FITs) who were either met by the researcher during his travels in Kazakhstan or identified as potential informants to be studied according to their potential for developing new insights or render different points of views regarding perceptions of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices. Some questions in the interviews (What is your definition of an authentic tourism experience? Which aspects of your tourism experience were perceived as authentic while travelling in Kazakhstan?) involved rich and complex answers from the participants. The study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data. The transcripts of interviews were coded line by line, looking for recurrent themes in the interviews which were developed and refined with the integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature. Analyses and interpretations were contextualised in regard to the various stakeholders being interviewed and the Kazakhstani context, in particular highlighting the infancy stage of eco-cultural tourism development in the country.

## **Findings**

### ***Rebirth of nomadic culture and its characterisation***

For the majority of the Tulip tour clients, traditional nomadic culture in Kazakhstan is associated with mobility of housing (yurts) and an autonomous way of life. A third of

the tourists interviewed from both tours perceived nomadic people as being quite adaptive to resources and climate. Two visitors of the Kyzylarai tour specifically mentioned that nomadic people had a “special connection”, a “freedom spirit” attached to the cultural landscapes:

“Real nomads don’t have a house or a definite place to live. They have to move every couple of weeks or months depending on the season. In winter they may go to the steppes or to more diversified forests areas, and in the summertime to the mountains where the climate is a bit cooler. They are always in search for food and cattle.”

In contrast, a third of the visitors on both the Tulip and Kyzylarai tours felt that traditional Kazakh culture had disappeared. They saw how local communities had profoundly changed their lifestyles, often living in towns and villages and no longer moving from one dwelling to another. As one visitor on the Tulip tour highlighted:

We don’t believe in ‘neo-nomadism’. Any tourism activities will influence and change the people and their traditions with the Westernisation and transformation of their cultural habits.”

This statement was supported by three FITs, for whom “traditional nomadic culture tended to vanish as more people resided in the cities”. They also held the huge impact of modernity, with the Westernisation of people’s lifestyles, as being responsible for the changes in their cultural habits and thus obliged “Kazakhstani people to not forget their traditions but rather reinvent them with the modernisation of their country.”

Some of the former nomadic people living in Kazakhstani villages still practised a pastoralist system of moving around the pastures with the cattle in the summer but staying in the villages in the winter. This practice was mentioned mostly by FITs who managed to witness local populations moving with their cattle in the summer. More than three-quarters of the FITs considered traditional nomadic culture as being deeply

linked to the landscapes as well as the practice of the people living with their livestock. One such traveller used the words “pastoralist traditions” and “horse culture” to depict the way former nomads used to live in the country. Another FIT expressed his impression of contemporary Kazakhstani lifestyles, after having travelled several months in the Kazakh steppes:

“Kazakh people are living with their environment, traditionally yurts and livestock breeding. Kazakhstan is located among the Silk Road countries and therefore the transportation of merchandises. There are no proper nomads as such, but life organised around different oases. The pastoralist system around different villages in rural areas is the way nomadic people are living right now.”

The new pastoralist system that characterises the neo-nomadic culture was thus perceived as a revival of a former traditional lifestyle for the sake of political and tourism development in the country.

A small majority of visitors from both tours conceded this commodification process was organised mainly for tourism business purposes, which was “a condition for the survival of the tourism industry in the country”. This statement was supported by three FITs, for whom “traditional nomadic culture tends to vanish as more people reside in the cities”. Although, as one visitor on the Tulip tour noted, authenticity could be found in the local parks and bazaars of the cultural capital Almaty, as the old capital city still reflected “how Kazakhstani people live today”. Even so, three FITs held the huge impact of modernity, with the Westernisation of people’s lifestyles, as being responsible for the changes in their cultural habits. Two FITs also believed that the recent development of tourism in the country emphasised the need to preserve and develop nomadic culture, in particular highlighted “the strong sense of hospitality that characterises former nomads”. Two other FITs gave some evidence of Kazakhstani cultural hybridity when

travelling in the southern part of the country:

“We witnessed in the area of Almaty some organised yurt-camps for tourists, mixing the original traditions with new technologies, big cars, etc. ...They are wearing traditional clothes and they are coming there to ‘get back to their roots’.”

Along with cultural performances and traditional games played during special events and national days, the Kazakh language, which became the state language in 1989, was perceived by some visitors as being another element in the renaissance of the traditional nomadic culture. Three visitors on the Tulip tour acknowledged the importance of the Kazakh language as a mean to convey an authentic tourism experience:

“Kazakh language is the main part of the renaissance in the country, but is essentially a political tool to re-establish Kazakh traditions in the villages (what can be called as well a ‘Kazakhisation’ of the nation).”

But for another Tulip tour client, who had previously experienced some official events, the Russian language was more authentic because that was the language used by Kazakhstanis in their everyday lives:

“I do think Kazakh language plays a role in the renaissance of the Kazakhstani culture and its identity, especially as a medium to convey some special meaning. Kazakh language is always practised for the official events (with Kazakh officials) but I feel Russian language is better used for the everyday conversations and looks easier to use.”

In addition to the level of preparation, the ability to speak Kazakh and Russian languages was mentioned by some visitors as a factor that can contribute to an authentic experience.

Meeting visitors’ expectations of ‘authentic’ nomadic cultureOverall, the sustainable nature of the former nomadic culture and lifestyle was recognised by all tourism

suppliers and visitors as being an important component for the development of Kazakhstani eco-tourism and identity of the country. Key experts in the country's nomadic culture indicated former nomads used to live closely with nature in a sustainable way, using and consuming natural resources (fauna and flora) before moving to another dwelling setting. In this context, eco-cultural landscapes (steppes) and the different meanings and symbolic aspects of the Kazakhstani fauna (eagles, wolves) and flora (plants) were seen to be essential elements to portraying a fair and impartial image of an authentic tourism experience (Tiberghien et al., 2018). However, while half of the Tulip tour visitors conceded the need to focus on a kind of tourism that preserved the natural environment and didn't change the way of life of local populations, one of them held a different opinion:

“This kind of tourism in the steppes can be uncomfortable for people of a certain age. Generally eco-tourism is not comfortable enough for me. There is a need to balance the traditional aspects of the tourism experience with more comfort.”

A certain level of comfort was important for this German tourist, who emphasised that some aspects of the nomadic culture may have needed to be adapted and commodified in order to meet visitors' requirements. The revival of nomadic culture in the Tulip tour was negotiated between the tour operator and the home-stay providers as a compromise to satisfy some of the visitors' needs for more comfort and Europeanised meals.

The growth of eco-cultural tourism development in Kazakhstan was considered important by one NGO coordinator for whom there was a need to connect visitors to the people who kept breeding their cattle in the rural areas. For him, it was “critical to have an authentic tourism experience with semi-nomads who had been living this way for centuries”. When interviewed about their authentication positions regarding the scenery encountered during the eco-tours, home-stay providers associated Kazakhstani cultural

landscapes with “wild nature”, “unspoilt and unique landscapes”, “natural sightseeing” and “diversity of deserts, mountains and pine forests”.

The archaeological site of Begazy, which was included in the Kyzylarai tour, offered a unique opportunity for visitors to witness an ancient ‘authentic’ historical site from the Bronze Age (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Similarly, the Tulip tour encompassed the UNESCO World Heritage Site (2004) of Tamgaly, where petroglyphs from the Bronze Age can be found (Figure 3). Tamgaly is situated 180 kilometres from Almaty in South Kazakhstan, and was authenticated by UNESCO in 2004 as being ‘genuinely authentic’ for visitors:

The archaeological landscape of Tamgaly features a remarkable concentration of some 5,000 petroglyphs, associated settlements and burial grounds, which together provide testimony to the husbandry, social organisation and rituals of pastoral peoples from the Bronze Age right through to the early 20th century. The large size of the early petroglyphs, their unique images and the quality of their iconography sets them apart from the wealth of rock art in Central Asia. The petroglyphs still keep their pristine character and essential natural and cultural features intact.

Figure 3

A majority of NGO coordinators confirmed that the Kazakhstani cultural landscapes often constituted the main authentic aspect of a visitor experience. From a more pragmatic perspective, NGO coordinators pointed out the need to (re)connect Kazakhstani semi-nomadic people and visitors with traditional nomadic lifestyles by using cultural landscapes as a mean to satisfy and meet visitors’ expectations about traditional nomadic culture. As described earlier, the steppes landscapes and the former nomadic populations living in the area are integrally part of the visitors’ tourism

experiences. For FITs, the cultural landscapes that brought visitors to the country were as much the steppes as the inhabitants living there. In Kazakhstan, nature and steppes landscapes have a special role to play as sources of authentic tourism experiences, a vision shared by the majority of home-stay providers. As an integral part of the tourism destination, Kazakhstani cultural landscapes were associated by local communities with local pride in the nomadic lifestyle, a topic similarly addressed by Buckley, Ollenburg and Zhong (2008) in their evaluation of Mongolian cultural landscapes.

#### *Old and new nomadic architecture*

The neo-nomadic culture was seen as a process of assimilation of Western architectural standards into traditional buildings. For the majority of specialists in nomadic culture interviewed, this renaissance was not witnessed in the rural villages because Kazakhstani people stopped migrating (except for going to summer pastures with their cattle) and are now settled in the villages and in the main cities. According to a majority of FITs, Kazakh people were very proud of their traditions without being nationalistic and they favoured close connections with their families in the villages. As one visitor on the Tulip tour highlighted, “yurts seem to be in use mostly for tourists as a way to describe the former Kazakhstani traditions associated with the landscapes.” Similarly, one FIT acknowledged visitors could feel “a great sense of pride of the country mostly in the rural areas where they try to reconstruct yurts”. These reconstructions were part of the revival of the Kazakh people’s former lifestyles as a mean to accommodate tourists in accordance to their perception of traditional nomadic lifestyles.

In the Kyzylarai tour, visitors were welcomed to spend their time with their hosts in the guest houses, but some home-stay providers emphasised the possibility of building reconstructed yurts to satisfy tourists’ demands.

“The yurts in this tour are not original ones because the real yurts are more expensive and we cannot afford them. Moreover, we only stay here for a month and if we were here for three months or more we could have organised them but right now we can’t.”

Figure 4 shows a yurt-camp set up by the Tulip tour home-stay providers. These yurts incorporated some traditional Kazakhstani ornaments but their structures, traditionally in wood, were replaced by aluminium. Despite the lack of genuine materials in their construction, these yurts were perceived as authentic by a majority of the Tulip tourists.

Figure 4

A majority of home-stay providers acknowledged that modern technologies (such as satellite televisions) and a change of habitat did not negatively influence the visitors' perception of authenticity of nomadic cultural landscapes:

“Modernity is not a problem for visitors and the global perception of authenticity of their tourism experience is not being necessarily changed by modern technologies that are to be found in the villages.”

Instead, the Kyzylarai tour operator believed modernity is a “normal process” which reflected the social and economic changes encountered in the Kazakhstani rural areas:

“It would be totally inauthentic to have villages ‘frozen’ in time; people have to live with their times. Kazakhstan is a fast-developing country and we cannot refuse modernity. New technologies help us to live better, and to some extent prepare our villages to better cater the visitors' expectations.”

The neo-nomadic culture is thus seen as a process of assimilation of Western architectural standards into traditional buildings. For the majority of specialists in nomadic culture interviewed, this renaissance cannot be seen in the rural villages because Kazakhstani people stopped migrating (except for going to summer pastures with their cattle) and are now settled in the villages and in the main cities.

Reviving nomadic handicrafts The way collective identities in Kazakhstan are negotiated through the material and symbolic cultures of local place and space was illustrated by this comment from one home-stay provider:

“Since the independence of the country in the beginning of the 1990s, there is a re-appropriation of traditional elements of nomadic culture by populations from the villages who want to preserve and revive the traditions that disappeared during Soviet times as a mean to counter the rapid Westernisation processes that are happening in the cities; we are getting local visitors who are interested to (re)learn ancient traditions.”

Interestingly, the handmade craft-making production in the villages was perceived by home-stay providers as being part of the *revival* 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. Figure 5 shows the main home-stay provider of the Kyzylarai tour in front of a traditional carpet which decorates the wall of her living room where tourists have their meals. Depending on the tourists’ demand, home-stay providers in the Shabanbai Bi village offered tourists to make either traditional or new crafts out of fur materials.

Figure 5

Half of the tourists on the Kyzylarai tour who had the opportunity to witness some craft-making by the local community in their houses mentioned that traditional craft-making had little influence on their perception of the revival of traditional nomadic culture. Only one of the tourists saw traditional craft-making as part of the renaissance of the nomadic culture. He indicated that some ornaments and symbolic figures were found recurrently in the crafts as well as the fur materials that were used to make them. Half of the home-stay providers were aware that reproductions of some ancient crafts,

including traditional Kazakhstani ornaments, were perceived as authentic by tourists when the crafts were carried out and worn in the visitors' homes. Four FITs indicated that some remnants of traditional nomadic culture could be found in the crafts sold in the local bazaars – for example, *tapochkis* (slippers made out of fur) which visitors wore back home and small yurts made in fur and incorporating Kazakh ornaments – although they challenged its authenticity:

“The crafts sold here and there, all of these are done for the tourists, and it is not nomadic. For example, small yurts that are sold in the bazaars – it is a fake version of the traditional nomadic culture.”

Small yurt souvenirs were offered to Tulip tourists at the end of their two days' experience in the Kazakhstani steppes (Figure 6). These yurts were made in fur and incorporated traditional Kazakh ornaments yet, despite this, they were perceived by some Tulip tourists as not representing traditional nomadic culture, instead they were made only for tourism purposes.

Figure 6

Here, the authenticity of the crafts was being evaluated as an aspect of meaning-making and identity-building (Cohen, 1989; Jamal & Hill, 2004) and reflected ‘the spirit of the place visited whether or not their design is based upon tradition or just reflected the state of mind of the visitor’ (Schouten, 2006, p. 200).

Consuming traditional culinary traditionsTourist demand for food perceived to be ‘traditional’ and ‘local’ can also be viewed as being linked to a quest for authenticity (Sims, 2009). It can be argued that local food aims at reconnecting consumers with the

people and places that produce their food (Holloway et al., 2006) and that this connection is a powerful part of an integrated tourism experience (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). For a majority of visitors, their quest for authentic tourism experiences varied according to their profile and attitude towards authenticity. One-third of the FITs thought nomadic food was still objectively authentic; in particular, they insisted on the importance of the hosts teaching their guests how to cook national food (*bes barmak*, and *Kymiz*). As one of them pointed out:

“I was invited to one Kazakh family and they cooked *bes barmak*. It was made of goat and horse meat, and I had the feeling it was the national food.”

The meals served during the Kyzylarai tour were interpreted in various ways by the visitors. Two of them acknowledged the meals were prepared according to the Kazakh traditions, “as they would do it for themselves”. However, the remaining of the tour participants mentioned that their perceptions of the meals made of horse meat were subject to their interpretation of traditional nomadic culture, and therefore were perceived as subjectively authentic. One of the Kyzylarai tourists explained:

“Meals and hospitality can also be perceived as authentic - because this perception corresponds to what I have personally constructed myself before coming as well as my expectations. I found the *dastarkhan* subjectively authentic because we were served the way they always did for themselves, but it was my interpretation.”

The sharing of a traditional meal, or *dastarkhan* (Figure 7), with the local people helped tourists on the Kyzylarai tour to understand traditional nomadic culture. Similarly, all local tourism providers emphasised their culinary traditions from the horse culture (*bes barmak*, *kuyrdak*) and horse milk (*kymiz*) remained traditional in Shabanbai Bi village and served for visitors as the local people would eat them.

Figure 7

Conversely, the Europeanised food that was served during the Tulip tour was perceived as staged and artificial by more than half of the visitors. One of them interpreted the food served during the tour as a simplified and stereotyped version of their cultural heritage:

“Food served on sites should not be too Europeanised as it gives a lesser impression of what was their traditional lifestyles. No special cultural events should be organised especially for visitors, but if a wedding occurs during the tour, visitors should be able to witness it. Otherwise these events are perceived as a ‘folklorisation’ of their traditional lifestyles.”

While having a Western-style dinner in the yurts in the evening, one visitor on the Tulip tour identified the traditional way of boiling water in a samovar (Figure 8) as an experientially authentic part of the tour:

“The experience of seeing people boiling the water in samovars for our dinner is authentic.”

Figure 8

The yurt-camp organised in the steppes landscapes in South Kazakhstan for the Tulip tour was adjusted (food, levels of comfort in the yurts and proper toilets) especially for the needs of the visitors. Home-stay providers displayed a Kazakhstani culture ‘on stage’, allowed visitors to see only the ‘front stage’ (MacCannell, 1973) of the tourism encounters. Two Tulip clients 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.”

For seven other Tulip tourists, a revival of the nomadic culture could be seen in the way the rural people cooked and lived; namely, they still lived from cattle and have no gardens around their houses. Therefore, the ways in which food and place were constructed by visitors on both tours underlined how traditional nomadic food was perceived differently by different visitors from the tours. In particular, if the food eaten corresponded to the visitors’ preconceptions about what a traditional nomadic meal was, the food was considered as more authentic. The concept of food heritage in cultural landscapes made sense in the village of Shabanbai Bi as the visitors valued home-made nomadic food which they perceived as being traditional because of its long history of production in that location.

Being part of nomadic cultural performancesAccording to Edensor (1998), the experience of the visitor is related to performance-based touristic space that shapes individual and collective as well as place-based identities. Tiberghien, Bremner and Milne (2017) showed the various parameters of the host–guest relationship that facilitated access to the ‘backstage’ of Kazakhstani tourism destinations in rural areas were existential and performative activities favouring reciprocal hosts-guest interactions. Home-stay providers suggested a number of ways to engage tourists with the traditional nomadic culture. Some of them thought members of the local communities should organise staged theatrical performances and traditional festivals

(*mereke*) represent one way visitors can witness traditional events in the villages. A home-stay provider revealed that “in the village of Shabanbai Bi there are still a club and two theatres playing satirical games regularly with one called the theatre of the people”.

This perception was shared by most government officials, who emphasised the need to stage some of the nomadic culture traditions that disappeared during Soviet times; for example, cultural performances with traditional clothes or national games organised around the horse culture could be held in the reconstructed yurt camps. A similar point of view was articulated by the main organiser of the Tulip tour, who said yurts were “better than living in a tent”, showcasing the ‘front stage’ of Kazakhstani lifestyle. In contrast, a majority of the NGO coordinators did not see the need to stage something especially for the visitors – they believed that an authentic tourism experience could be found in the villages where some events were still happening naturally and offered visitors the possibility to witness cultural artefacts.

Five visitors on the Tulip tour mentioned several occasions when they noticed a renaissance of nomadic culture. The revival of traditions was witnessed particularly during special occasions and allowed visitors to experience and learn about traditional nomadic culture:

“Cultural performances during special events (like weddings or national days) are portraying traditional cultural artefacts: traditional dances and games during the *Nauryz* celebrations. Traditional games like *kokpar* (a traditional horse game) no longer exist as well, and you can see them only in special festivals in the countryside or during special city events (Almaty city day) as a way of portraying local culture.”

National days and feasts periods like the Kazakh New Year, *Nauryz*, provided great opportunities for tourists to witness traditional games like horse and hunting festivals.

Some local home-stay providers were ready to stage cultural events like *kokpar* as an additional attraction for visitors. In the village of Shabanbai Bi, village festivals (*mereke*) represented one way visitors could witness traditional events in the villages. A home-stay provider revealed that “in the village of Shabanbai Bi there are still a club and two theatres playing satirical games regularly with one called the theatre of the people”. Whether performed in a village setting or in the Kazakhstani cultural landscapes, visitors’ perception of authenticity was enhanced when they watched these traditional cultural performances.

### ***Discussion and ConclusionsAuthenticity, territorial brands and eco-cultural tourism development***

Kazakhstani steppes reflect a long history of people interacting with the environment, as acknowledged by several tourism providers and NGOs who advocated the development of eco-cultural tourism in the country. Operators and visitors from both the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours saw the cultural landscapes not only as a source of authentic tourism experiences, but also as an element of the eco-cultural tourism encounter that remains unchanged and objectively authentic. By reconnecting their ancestral roots to the landscapes, home-stay providers can construct, offer and promote tourism experiences that emphasise the steppes and associated cultural traditions as authentic tourism encounters. Similarly to Sims (2009, p. 329) who argues that local food and drinks are an asset to sustainable tourism because “they enable host communities to capitalise on visitors’ desire for some form of ‘authentic’ experience that will enable them to connect with the place and culture of their destination”, tourism providers acknowledged Kazakhstani cultural landscapes and culinary traditions often constituted the main

aspect of authenticity of the tourism experience being offered to visitors.

This study details that almost all the stakeholders (home-stay providers, policymakers, Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan and Tulip tour operators, local and international NGOs and specialists in nomadic culture) involved in the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism emphasised the importance of ecological (fauna and flora) and cultural aspects (traditional games, craft-making and cultural performances) in visitors' experiences, a finding validated by tourists themselves. Politically, nomadic culture was perceived by government officials as a key theme in the country's ongoing process of identity-making (Tiberghien & Xie, 2018). For specialists in nomadic culture, a rebirth of nomadic traditions was necessary for tourism development purposes as it contributed to validate the visitors' romantic views of the nomadic culture and the Silk Road.

Findings revealed that with the increasing commodification of cultural heritage and the demand for eco-cultural tourism, visitors can discover the country with tourism operators working with home-stay providers who have ancestral links to the villages (Carr, 2008). In this way, the eco-tourist "yearns for a specialised, exclusive experience" (Wallace & Russell, 2004, p. 236). By commodifying traditional games in the villages, home-stay providers were hoping to create new tourism products and experiences for local and international visitors that incorporate authentic cultural and historical components of the traditional nomadic lifestyle. Interestingly, home-stay providers in Shabanbai Bi village highlighted the contradictions between continuing to offer the same tourism experience while also increasing the number of tourists, thus organised more staged cultural performances and commercial cultural artefacts to expand the number of visitors in their villages and keep a 'traditional' approach preserving their cultural authenticity. In Shabanbai Bi village, one of the local home-

stay providers mentioned the possibility of organising cultural events (traditional games and cultural performances) specifically for the tourists even though the events could be perceived as staged. Conversely in the Tulip tour where the tourism experience is more commodified, by refocusing the tourism experience on authentic aspects of the traditional nomadic culture, home-stay providers of the Tulip tour could better meet visitors' demands for authentic nomadic tourism encounters. The challenge for tourism providers is to balance the visitors' romantic views of traditional nomadic culture with the cultural evolution that prevails in Kazakhstani rural areas.

The findings of this study highlighted that cultural landscapes were seen by most stakeholders as one of the best sources of authentic tourism experiences for visitors. By providing more information about the sense of place and the cultural landscapes on the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours, tour organisers participate in increasing visitors' understanding of cultural heritage in the villages, and thus in the perceived authenticity of the place. Combining ecological and cultural aspects of the steppes landscapes with local populations' lives is a model that fits well into the format of eco-cultural tourism described by Wallace and Russell (2004). The Kyzylarai tour offers a unique tourism experience as a mix of various aspects of former nomadic culture (culinary traditions, nomadic lifestyle) that are perceived as authentic for visitors. Just as Carry (2008, p. 38) mentions with the launch of nature walks around Rotorua in New Zealand, "there has been some acknowledgment that the cultural landscape may offer a truly authentic and unique selling point." As sources of authentic tourism encounters, Kazakhstani steppes landscapes and arts and crafts souvenirs, which were considered by both tourism suppliers and visitors to be an integral part of the tangible heritage that the destination has to offer, are important icons to sustain the image of Kazakhstan as an authentic destination.

The reinvention of traditions, as advocated by government officials, can nonetheless serve a local tourism industry that could satisfy a wider audience of visitors who are less interested in the authenticity of their tourism experiences. The gradual transformations of Kazakhstani culture for tourism can be done by an incremental social force led by different stakeholders and take place at a micro level with a traceable cycle (Tiberghien & Xie, 2018; Xie & Lane, 2006). In Tibet, Kolas (2008) explains that the home-stay programs and families are carefully selected by tourism agencies and tour operators under the strict control of the government, providing an opportunity for tourists to take a close look of “backstage” and “authentic” Tibetan culture. The transformation of Tibetan culture has thus gone through a long process while authenticity and commodification construct a progressive relationship. Similarly, as Kazakhstan keeps defining the dynamic nature of its cultural heritage and the possibilities for its eco-cultural tourism practices, it is important to keep in mind that access to the ‘backstage’ of local populations is linked to both visitors’ and tourism providers’ perceptions of authenticity, an authenticity that has become an important criteria in the promotion of cultural difference among Central Asian countries. The rich cultural landscapes and the natural interactions with visitors are providing, as Wallace and Russell (2004, p. 241) argue, ‘marginal local communities opportunities for financial betterment and the simultaneous preservation and promotion of their natural and cultural heritage’.

### ***Neo-Nomadic culture, terroir and tourism development***

It is argued (Selwyn, 1996; Wang, 1999) that the politics of authenticity, and representation of culture for the viewing public, influence the creation of tourism products. In Kazakhstan, the neo-nomadic culture is embedded in the politics of authenticity between various stakeholders involved in the development of Kazakhstani

tourism. As a continuum between intangible values, sense of living history and continuity of heritage traditions (Sofield & Li, 1998), neo-nomadic 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. Similarly to the organically evolved landscapes defined by UNESCO (2008) as continuing landscapes which retain an active social role in contemporary society associated with a traditional way of life, in which the evolutionary process is still in progress and where it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time, the distinctive Kazakhstani nomadic cultural landscapes and traditions can be reconstructed through the process of acculturation and assimilation and practised as a mean to promote authentic nomadic encounters. The use of neo-nomadic culture as territorial brand for Kazakhstan authentic tourism development, both as a mean for policy-making in the management of the place (Kavaratzis, 2005) and a tool for place branding (Lorenzini et al., 2011), finds its relevance in the development of the country's international recognition for authentic eco-cultural tourism practices, an authenticity acknowledged and sought after by the visitors interviewed in the study. The presence and incorporation of neo-nomadic culture as territorial brand for Kazakhstan could thus be considered as an important trigger and driver for tourism development (Parrott, Wilson, & Murdoch, 2002) but would need an adequate process of planning and management if being pursued and acknowledged by the local authorities. Involving communities in a reciprocal way with the destination decision makers would generate a shared vision of the territory which can be beneficial for both the destination and local stakeholders involved in Kazakhstan tourism development.

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