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Kyrgyzstan’s Rural Tourism Development

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Abstract

Rural and community-based tourism (CBT) is founded on the ideals of empowerment and participation, aiming to foster local development through community engagement and self-governance. In Kyrgyzstan, a mountainous country in Central Asia with limited traditional development opportunities, a CBT network was established by the Swiss development NGO Helvetas in the year 2000, to provide alternative sources of income in rural areas. This research utilizes semi-structured interviews and participant observation during a three-months stay to gather data, focusing on the interactions between local communities, development organizations, and the global tourism market. Addressing a research gap in understanding the socio-cultural impacts of rural and community-based tourism in recent years, this study traces the developments and scrutinizes the assumptions of CBT. Findings reveal that while CBT helps to create jobs in rural areas, it fails to distribute its revenue evenly, amplifying internal power imbalances. The emergence of independent guesthouses outside the CBT network, driven by digital technologies and donor-funded training, further increases competition. CBT and rural tourism have the potential for host empowerment, yet, this is closely tied to dependence on global capital and trends influencing development projects, like “green growth.” This dependency also includes fulfilling the expectations of Western tourists based on romanticized imaginaries. This thesis argues for a nuanced understanding and application of the concept of *community*, as well for the use of studying *values* in the context of tourism development. It also discusses power relations and the flaws and limitations of community-based tourism, particularly in the context of Kyrgyzstan’s transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism.

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1: Introduction

It was the beginning of September, and I had been in Kyrgyzstan for almost a month. When applying for the KWA Stipend, which would later finance my research stay, I had chosen the longest timeframe available: three months. At the time, it seemed like the only logical choice. Had I not, in countless self-repeating debates in various Bachelor's and Master's seminars over the years, heard the echoes of my fellow students calling for "more ethnographic research" when criticizing our assigned course literature? Wasn't ethnographic fieldwork precisely what made our discipline of anthropology so unique and worth pursuing? However, at the moment I was about to start my own field research in Kyrgyzstan, I felt neither prepared nor qualified to carry out this task I had chosen for myself. At this instant, gazing out of my Soviet-style apartment building's window and not really knowing how to take that first step, I asked myself if I should not have chosen to stay only one month after all.

Even writing an exclusively theoretical paper, only infused with a certain sort of exotic flavor that one could only bring home if one had actually *been there*, now seemed like the better idea. Back in the classroom, it was simple to disagree emphatically with Lévi-Strauss, who said that "adventure has no place in the anthropologist's profession; it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks, which detract from his effective work through the incidental loss of weeks or months" (Lévi-Strauss 1992, 17). This statement felt much more difficult to dispute now that I was floating around in a limbo of unanswered calls and cancellations for scheduled meetings with interlocutors. While, unlike the famous French anthropologist, I was not plagued by tropical diseases, I grew equally disenchanted with the romanticism of fieldwork, being lost on an endlessly empty ocean of grass, "petrified with dreariness" (Chekhov 1888)—*Sinistres Steppes*, in other words.

So, what had I been doing during my first month in Kyrgyzstan before plunging myself into fieldwork? Of course, I had traveled around—I had been a tourist. This prelude served the purpose of helping me to improve my Russian skills and providing perspective on the country's geographical and social fabric, while also teaching me the practicalities of travel and daily life in my new environment. On the other hand, I pursued the things that I liked doing in my leisure hours, immersing myself in the natural beauty surrounding me, hiking through rugged landscapes and sleeping in yurts, and encountering various tourists doing similar activities. I also rode my mountain bike through vast stretches of land, getting to know the more remote corners of the country, where few fellow travelers ventured. However, after touring the country for some weeks, I ended up in the resort town Cholpon-Ata on Issyk-Kul Lake, where I quickly got bored of the daily rhythms of life of the "leisure class" (MacCannell [1976] 1999).

And so, anxious to get my research going, I relocated to Bishkek, the country's capital, lodged in a guesthouse, and searched for a more permanent home. Many of its inhabitants describe the city as feeling like a "big village" due to its wide tree-lined streets, open spaces, and many public parks. Also, the high amount of low-density and suburban settlements surrounding the rows of Soviet apartment blocks and the glass-lined modern developments that were springing up everywhere like mushrooms after rain were making it feel less overwhelming than elsewhere in Central Asia. Being the only city in the country with more than a million inhabitants, Bishkek felt quite distinct from the rest of Kyrgyzstan I had previously experienced, with its expansive steppes and towering mountain ranges. Not only did it boast many imposing government buildings and memorials, but it also came with certain comforts that only a large city can afford. As a Canadian development worker who would quickly become a friend told me excitedly, "You can even get real Italian Parmesan here!"

I settled into an apartment that I was to share with a Kyrgyz guy roughly my age for the next two and a half months and announced my arrival to my contact at the University of Central Asia. Here, I established initial research connections, gradually initiating the process of my study. Stumbling from social interaction to social interaction, into developers' offices, and in and out of guesthouses, I must not have appeared like a "researcher." People were amused, yet curious, when I squeezed myself into shared taxis that were full to the brim, tried to buy things at a bazaar in broken Russian, or strolled around rural villages as the only foreigner in sight. Being aware that I must have still looked like a tourist didn't make it easier. In general, Kyrgyzstan is a country with a strict age hierarchy, but solely due to my being visibly European (many people thought that I was Russian too), I was granted a higher status, or at least more "room for freedom," than a Kyrgyz person my age would have received.

The conundrum of studying tourism and switching in and out of the roles of tourist and researcher followed me throughout the course of my research, as did the condition of always being surprised anew. Having never been to Central Asia before, I brought with me a plethora of expectations that I was eager to dispel. Most importantly, I had questions—plenty of them—and the desire to scratch the surface on some of them. During my field visits, interviews, and daily interactions with people, I sought clues that could provide answers to these questions. The broad aim of this thesis was to scrutinize the concepts of *community* and *value* in the very special case of rural community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. Through spending a total of four months traveling, living and learning, it was my countless mundane encounters that brought to the fore even more questions, which might, in the end, have helped me get closer to answering what I set out to. Questions that I would not even be able to pose if I had not been to Kyrgyzstan in the first place.

Formulating the Research Question

This section explains how I arrived at the research question for this paper. First, it is important to mention that while I developed an interest in Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, over the years, tourism only entered the picture at a later point. I ended up choosing this topic because it presented a relatively low barrier to entry compared to other research fields. However, what will hopefully be revealed in the course of this thesis is that tourism is a valuable lens through which to study complex socio-cultural phenomena in an ever-globalizing world, addressing important topics such as identity, representation, justice, and many more. Additionally, travel and tourism are among the world's largest economic sectors, making up around 10% of global GDP and jobs, which adds to its relevance (Jus and Misrahi 2021). While reading up on tourism in Kyrgyzstan, I quickly discovered the existence of community-based tourism (CBT), both here and elsewhere, whose principles of self-governance and ownership struck me as fertile ground for anthropological investigation.

Nicola Palmer (2006) and Baktygulov et al. (2010) describe the development of CBT Kyrgyzstan in its initial stages. The literature review by Shokirov et al. (2014, 37) found that 87% of all research on tourism in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is only concerned with economic outcomes. Nazgul Jenish (2018) provides more context for tourism in Kyrgyzstan, including policy recommendations and limitations for growth; however, she is also mainly concerned with economics. Cynthia Werner (2003) contributed a profoundly anthropological study on how tourism mediators actively worked to construct a positive image for the use of tourism in Kyrgyzstan through creative reworkings of its historical, cultural, and natural assets. However, when it comes to studying local control and community wellbeing, as well as rural tourism and CBT in Kyrgyzstan as a whole, research gaps emerge (Shokirov et al. 2014, 40; Jenish 2018, 38).

Noel Salazar, in his general critique of the concept of community-based tourism, posed important questions that helped me formulate my own research (Salazar 2012a). Specifically, he challenged the use of the concept of *community* in CBT and examined the ethical dilemmas that arise from its uncritical application, while also highlighting the critical role of guides as cultural ambassadors.

After reading a few Master's theses (Kloiber 2008; Borchardt 2018; Heyneman 2019; Toichuev 2022) available on CBT in Kyrgyzstan, I gathered that it would be feasible to undertake my own research on this topic. However, none of these theses and papers were written by anthropologists, with Borchardt's (2018) thesis coming closest due to its use of semi-structured interviews. Most of this research however has its background in tourism studies, business, or marketing, and is primarily concerned with identifying factors hindering the growth of CBT. This presents a one-sided perspective that does not account for impacts on local communities and culture and rarely questions the growth imperative. While countless anthropological studies of CBT exist (Wearing and McDonald 2002; Blackstock 2005; Stonich 2005; Stronza 2005 etc.), I was able to find only a single anthropological study on CBT Kyrgyzstan (Palmer 2006), since which a lot of time had elapsed. On top of that, I was unable to find a single anthropological study, that critically examined the concept of community in light of CBT, leading me to choose this as my first objective, following Salazar (2012a).¹

While the anthropological study of *value* has seen a renaissance in recent years (see DuBois and Salas 2021; Souleles, Archer, and Thaning 2023), there has not yet been an application of

¹ Note that, released in 2023, after I had written my research proposal, an article by anthropologist Estaban Ruiz-Ballesteros was published, that explored many of the same questions (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023). After reading said article after my research stay, I incorporated insights from it into my own conclusions.

these concepts to community-based tourism. The inclusion of studying the values of CBT and rural tourism came about during the course of my research through engagement with the ethnographic material I had gathered up to that point.² Specifically, the fact that community-based and rural tourism development is largely driven by international donor organizations, whose agendas are strongly influenced by values and conceptualizations of “the good” (Jamal and Camargo 2014, 23), and which in some cases may introduce foreign values to a particular setting (Dolezal and Novelli 2022, 2356), highlighted the relevance for the anthropological study of transmitted values. Lastly, the “slipperiness” of terms like community and value, as well as my interlocutors’ varied applications of them, made them seem worthwhile to study.

This leads me to my research question: “What do different conceptions and applications of ‘community’ and of ‘value’ tell us about power relations within rural and community-based tourism (CBT) in Kyrgyzstan?” The research question explores multiple dimensions of rural and community-based tourism (CBT) in Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, it examines the claims made by CBT by asking how various stakeholders, including local communities, international NGOs, and government entities, define and apply the concept of community within CBT initiatives. This involves understanding the power dynamics that emerge from differing interpretations and implementations of community and how these dynamics affect the claimed benefits of CBT, specifically concerning local governance and empowerment. Secondly, the research investigates the transfer of values through development projects. This entails analyzing how international donor-driven agendas influence local CBT practices, impacting everything from the transferal of entrepreneurial skills to shifts in social norms. It also looks at how these values

² The shifts and developments in my research question will be examined more in depth in Chapter 3.

are received, adapted, or resisted by local communities, and what implications this has for cultural change and, again, the concept of CBT.

Thirdly, dependencies on the global tourism market are examined, particularly how CBT projects in Kyrgyzstan are integrated into and influenced by global economic trends as well as tourist expectations and preferences. This includes assessing the economic viability of CBT initiatives, the sustainability of tourism-driven development, and the recent upheaval in independent guesthouses. Moreover, it involves understanding CBT's reliance on "responsible" tourists and addresses the implications of authenticity in cultural tourism products. Overall, the research question highlights the interplay between local and global forces, revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in CBT in Kyrgyzstan. The research aims to uncover how the concepts of community and values both challenge and reinforce power relations, providing insights into the wider implications for rural development and cultural integrity in an increasingly globalized world.

Structure of the thesis

In the introduction, I situate myself within the field and explain how I arrived at the research question. The next chapter delves deeper into the underlying concepts and theories informing the research question and the paper as a whole. Specifically, it defines the concepts of community and value(s), and provides a brief history of development. It also covers the tradition of the anthropology of tourism, and the emergence of alternative tourism paradigms like rural and community-based tourism. Chapter 3 continues from the introduction, addressing my positionality as a researcher and the limitations of the research as well as ethical

considerations. The main focus of this chapter, however, lies on the methods used to gather and analyze the data. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce the field of my research, Kyrgyzstan as a tourist destination, highlighting the differences between two types of tourism using the examples of two very different destinations: Cholpon-Ata and Naryn. Thematically, Chapter 4 focuses on Soviet mass tourism and its legacies, while Chapter 5 concerns the establishment of alternative tourism in Kyrgyzstan. In line with more “classical” studies of anthropology of tourism, Chapter 6 examines the impacts of alternative tourism forms, specifically focusing on CBT, its economic viability, and the claims of even revenue distribution.

Chapter 7 inspects further claims of community-based tourism’s benefits, contrasting these with its challenges, including sustainability, empowerment, especially concerning women. It also investigates the development of independent rural tourism guesthouses in recent years. Chapter 8 focuses on host-guest interactions and employs the concept of values in different ways, exploring how local hospitality changes due to commoditization and what values and expectations Western tourists bring to Kyrgyzstan. It also highlights the roles of mediators like travel guides. Chapter 9 examines the role of development organizations, showing how different projects seek to develop tourism in Kyrgyzstan and where disagreements with locals might emerge. It emphasizes the contradiction between sustainability and green growth, demonstrating how values and global tourism trends affect local realities. The conclusion presents a critical theoretical discussion on the understanding and application of the concept of community in tourism development, as well as how studying values can generate novel ideas for tourism anthropology. It also addresses fundamental debates around the viability of CBT, particularly those relating to dependency and neoliberalism. Finally, the discussion is briefly summarized and implications for future research are provided.

2: Key Concepts and Theoretical Background

In this chapter, I explore key concepts and theoretical frameworks essential to my research on community-based tourism (CBT) in Kyrgyzstan. While this thesis lacks a singular overarching theoretical framework, it aims to demonstrate the merit of critically questioning concepts such as *community* and *value*, particularly in relation to understanding power dynamics underlying tourism development. This chapter begins with a thorough examination of the concept of community, addressing its definitions and applications in social science and highlighting the tension between structural and symbolic approaches. Next, I delve into the notion of value, discussing how adapting this theoretical lens enables the scrutiny of the values that underpin not only CBT but community cohesion as a whole and the contradictions caused when social values conflict with the creation of economic value. Subsequently, I consider the multifaceted concept of *development*, tracing its evolution and its intersection with tourism as a tool for poverty alleviation and sustainable growth. Then, I review anthropological perspectives on tourism, from early studies focusing on host-guest interactions to contemporary critiques. Lastly, I trace the history of alternative tourism forms like CBT.

Community

Community is a broad and fuzzy concept that is nonetheless one of the most widely used in social science research (Rapport 2010, 142). Its centrality to my research necessitates a brief exploration of its definitions here. The most general way to define community is as existing somewhere between kinship and society, as “a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion” (Gold 2005, 2).

Probing deeper into this statement reveals two general ways in which community can be conceptualized: structural and symbolic (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2666). The classic structural approaches define community along the axes of locality and functionality. Of importance here is a clear separation or boundary from the “outside world” and rigid social systems in place. This definition functionally views people in a community as a “social organism” (Durkheim [1893] 2019), united around common goals and interests.

In classical anthropological studies, community was often defined as a “valley” or a bounded locality where social ties and relations create a network of individuals that is internally homogenous and isolated (e.g., Redfield 1947). The problematic, as Barth already criticized when studying ethnic boundaries, is that they risk being naturalized, even though they are social boundaries shaped by interactions between different cultures (Barth 1998). Recently, critiques of traditional ethnographic studies that are carried out within local contexts have emerged, warning of studying communities as bounded and heterogeneous entities. Rapport and Amit aimed to separate sociality from place, specifically in reference to a globalized world of migrant identities (Amit and Rapport 2002). Similarly, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have criticized the anthropological concept of the “field” as a bounded entity that can be observed objectively by the scholar.

In contrast to this, the symbolic approach sees community much more as defining a communal identity by the act of self-ascription, where the constituting individuals can be heterogeneous, unequal, and hold different goals or aspirations (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2666). Building on Barth (1998) and elaborated by Cohen (2015), this view instead emphasizes the sense of belonging to a group. Symbolic approaches make the concept of community lose its hard and taxological quality of organizing social life, instead studying people’s attachment to communities and the

meanings they embed in them (ibid., 38). This brings the role of culture to the fore, as it recognizes that individuals can be part of multiple communities at the same time and shift between identifying with them fluidly.

In this way, communities do not need to be based on direct contact with others, as powerful common ideas or interests can be even more powerful, although indirect, mediators. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" is perhaps the most well-known approach to community in this way (B. R. Anderson 1983). He shows how, through the mediation of physical distance by the then-developing print media, a sense of community was first developed between people who before saw one another as vastly different. In Anderson's application it is already evident that communities may generate powerful imaginaries with potentially destructive forces. However, in both vernacular speech as well as academic writing, the term "community" is overwhelmingly used in a profoundly positive sense, for instance, as a "social group and a social environment to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong." (Rapport 2010, 145).

Only very recently have some studies emerged that focus on the inherent exclusivity of community, making it, in the extreme case, a "category of empire" (Beyer 2023). In this thesis, when referring to a distinct group of individuals that is limited by geographical boundaries, I will use the phrase "local community." When the term "community" is used on its own, it will have the connotation of self-ascribed membership in a group with a common symbolic meaning, keeping in mind that because it "interweaves interests, norms and identities" (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2666), it is no objectively observable fact, but rather a contested space, subject to change and challenge.

Value(s)

In a very real sense, anthropology could be said to have emerged around questions of value, and such questions have remained just below the surface of just about every important theoretical debate.

David Graeber *It is value that brings universes into being* (2013, 219–20)

Whether we see communities as people striving for the same ends or imagining themselves as belonging to a group around a shared identity, the question of what these groups of people “value,” or in other words, what matters to them, is paramount for understanding their formation and cohesion. Recently, great interest in contemporary anthropology has surged again in what is being referred to as “new value theory,” largely influenced by the writings of David Graeber (2001; 2013), as the recent special editions by Souleles et al.(2023) and DuBois and Salas (2021) show. However, the latter acknowledge that writers of the anthropology of value struggle to explain common themes and describe value processes across multiple different cases (ibid., 3). While this struggle for a common definition might seem like a good argument against theorizing about value as a whole, Souleles et al. (2023, 167) argue that value theorists like Graeber articulate a shared approach that aims at both pan-human generalization and context-specific reflections on social life.

This dual focus makes value theory attractive to anthropologists and is why I make value a central category of analysis in this thesis—in a sense turning the concept’s weakness, that it can be applied to almost anything, into its strength. Similarly, DuBois and Salas claim that the anthropological theory of value can highlight how political and economic discourses that usually presume total objectivity are indeed linked to morality and normative assumptions (DuBois and Salas 2021, 4). Connecting the concept of value to that of community, I argue that for community to be effective there has to be some common normative values underlying it,

creating lasting bonds between its members (e.g., Taylor 1989). In his conceptualization, Graeber connects economic *value*, sociological/normative *values*, as well as linguistic *value* distinctions (Graeber 2001). Traditionally, the relation between value and values has been thought to have gradually evolved from a values-based system of exchange (Mauss 1990) toward one dominated by the commodity form (Marx 1990).³

This “teleological” view suggests that the introduction of the commodity form from the outside led to the loss of some non-capitalist or traditional values in societies (e.g., Bohannan 1959). Graeber argues that economic, or monetary, value is easily measured because “money can compare everything to everything else” (Graeber 2021, 320). In contrast, social values, which are not comparable, are defined as “the way[s] in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality” (Graeber 2001, vii). This theory of value thus argues that the specific history accumulated by an object in its production, exchange, and consumption is crucial to its value and has some relation to larger societal values and also invites a dialogue around power. In this sense, his theory is a reworking of Mauss’s (1990) writings on reciprocity, where an object can be given new meanings through the process of exchange.

In capitalist societies, the logic of exchange overshadows the relationship between the people exchanging something. Yet, in everyday encounters and negotiations, reciprocity is not lost, however contradictory its relation to the exchange-logic is and whatever tensions it might bring. It is in the site of the community where that tension comes to the fore. In the special case of community-based tourism, a community organized around social values and economic

³ Recent research complicates this picture, arguing that there was no linear transition from exchange based around moral values of trust towards economic value (i.e. money), and that the commodity form has always co-existed with other notions of value (Graeber 2011, 40; Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

value production, this contradiction is especially evident (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2667). While the discussion between the relations of economic value and extra-economic sociological values might seem obscure to traditional economists, in the context of development, there is now a substantial focus on more diverse outcomes, including well-being, cultural development, and environmental conservation, presenting an interesting case for the application of value theory.

Development

Development is a challenging concept.

Tazim Jamal and Dianne Dredge *Tourism and Community Development Issues* (2014, 178)

While there are a multitude of diverse approaches today, development is primarily concerned with alleviating poverty and combating inequality. Here, I am specifically concerned with tourism as a vehicle for development, yet summarizing this special case speaks to larger trends and changes in the concept. Since international flights became affordable in the 1960s, tourism has emerged as an attractive development path due to its independence from existing industrial infrastructure and labor-intensive nature, which effectively combats unemployment (Sharpley and Telfer 2008, 17). Additionally, as one of the world's fastest-growing industries, tourism can theoretically be effective at redistributing wealth, especially when considering domestic tourism. Tourism is also not limited by trade barriers, although it can be severely impacted by travel bans due to political upheavals (ibid., 19).

Telfer (2009, 153–57) describes four paradigms of development since its outset and the role of tourism in each: 1) Modernization, which was based on an ideology of linear economic

growth stages, and the trickle-down effect. The “Western way of life” was promoted, and resort-style tourism developed. 2) Dependency, which emerged as a critique of the modernization paradigm, seeing that in development, the “core” was still exploiting the “periphery.” Tourism’s detrimental impacts on exploitation, cultural commoditization, and power structures became evident. 3) The era of economic neoliberalism, characterized by deregulation, viewed free markets, competition, and privatization as remedies for the sluggish progress of state-led development. Internationally, tourism businesses increasingly had to rely on loans, and multinational tourism operators established themselves.

4) Alternative development, emerging from the 1970s onwards, combats the top-down development approaches and is more people-oriented, focusing on their basic needs as well as empowerment, gender relations, and sustainability. Finally, 5) an “impasse” of previous development models, resulting in the contemporary situation lacking a singular development paradigm. Today, development (sometimes referred to as post-development) is critical of previous development discourse, instead taking a grass-roots perspective and promoting the self-governance of indigenous communities (ibid., 158). For tourism development, this means an increasing focus on diverse outcomes, apart from economic growth, such as socio-cultural or sustainable ones. In the conclusion, I will come back to this distinction, arguing how in current “alternative” development approaches, the influence of neoliberalism is still being felt.

At least since the seminal work by Peter Murphy ([1989] 2013) “community” has become a central focus of tourism developers, emphasizing not only local control and benefits but a more sustainable form of tourism. Returning to the various definitions of community previously discussed, “community development” typically refers to the “local community,” or in the context of tourism, the “host community” (Beeton 2006, 16). However, the question of

what defines successful community development remains unanswered due to the challenging nature of assessing factors and the inherent trade-offs associated with the benefits of tourism (ibid., 80). It is important to acknowledge that obtaining community benefits often requires making “cultural trade-offs.” Additionally, the use of the term “community” often obscures internal heterogeneity and power structures (Jamal and Dredge 2014, 3).

Anthropological Perspectives on Tourism

Anthropologists and tourists seem to have a lot in common. Both spend time exploring the cultural productions and rituals of society, and both carry the status of outsider as they make forays into the lives of others. Though as anthropologists we may be loath to admit any relationship to the sandal-footed, camera-toting legions in our midst, the truth is that tourism can be an ideal context for studying issues of political economy, social change and development, natural resource management, and cultural identity and expression. Indeed, many of the major questions that concern cultural anthropologists appear in the study of tourism.

Amanda Stronza *Anthropology of Tourism* (2001, 261)

Initially, anthropologists were resistant to recognizing the influence of tourism on the field sites that they considered to be “theirs” (Leite and Graburn 2009, 38). This only slowly changed in the 1970s, after which a whole subfield of the discipline emerged (Stasch 2017; Stronza 2001). One of the first large anthropological volumes about tourism, titled “Hosts and Guests” (Smith 1978), established a tradition of focusing on the perspective of the hosts and the impact their societies saw through being visited. While groundbreaking, this view also afforded little agency to the hosts themselves, instead focusing on the tourist as the constituting force of tourism. Another important early contributor is Dean MacCannell ([1974] 1999), who, following theories of alienation, sees tourism mainly as a symptom of modernity’s loss of meaning.

For MacCannell, the tourist is someone who searches for this lost kind of authenticity in an act akin to religious pilgrimage, yet is never satisfied in their quest, since touristic places can only offer a so-called “staged authenticity” (ibid., 106). Erik Cohen (1988) questions this objective judgment of authenticity against inauthenticity (ibid., 374). Rather, he views authenticity as emergent and not fixed (ibid., 380), challenging earlier approaches that perceived tourism as inherently destructive (e.g., Greenwood 1989). In contrast, Cohen recognized that “[c]ommoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products, neither for the locals nor for the tourists [...]” (E. Cohen 1988, 382). In short, these early discussions focused on describing cultural impacts and were primarily concerned with mass tourism (Turner and Ash 1976). Concerning the interactions of tourists and hosts, scholars saw tourism as a form of neocolonialism and lamented its cultural consequences (Leite and Graburn 2009, 39).

John Urry’s influential study (1990) examines the role of the “tourist gaze” in shaping not only tourist interactions but also what can become a touristic site in the first place. The “romantic gaze” is the way of seeing a landscape or object, transforming it from the mundane to something of aesthetic worth (ibid., 104-5). The “collective gaze,” in turn, is more concerned with the tourist industry, which turns places into destinations in the presence of large numbers of people, affirming to one another the truthfulness of their respective gazes but also producing and reproducing stereotypes of the visited people. By reworking Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze” (Foucault 2003), which involves doctors creating objective medical truths through often flawed scientific study, the power dynamics in institutionalized tourism become apparent, as it equally constructs truths about people and their relationships. Many studies

followed, each presenting unique ways to highlight the dimension of power in tourism (e.g., Reed 1997; Hollinshead 1999; Cheong and Miller 2000; Bianchi 2003).

These studies often have in common that the hosts not only appear as targets of power, but also become agents of themselves, while still taking into account larger global structures of power. Especially Hollinshead (1999) was influential in utilizing Foucault to criticize Western perspectives in academia, which “othered” the hosts. A similar approach to Urry’s comes from Noel Salazar (2010; 2012b), who speaks of “tourism imaginaries” as imagined notions about a place, carrying with them the power to shape realities and influence all actors in the tourism system. Still, Stronza (2001) argues that anthropologists have largely overlooked “how hosts might be affecting guests” (ibid., 274). However, this thesis particularly benefits from the expansion of this binary perspective to include the critical roles of intermediaries, mediators, or brokers—in this case, especially those of development workers and guides (Cheong and Miller 2000; Wearing and McDonald 2002; Werner 2003; Salazar 2012a).

While anthropological research on tourism as a tool for development dates back to the 1970s (De Kadt 1979), it was only later in the 1990s that it became accepted that tourism always has positive and negative consequences, which opened the way for the “ethicalization” of tourism, grounded within the discourse around sustainability (Castañeda 2012). This was largely influenced by anthropologists turning away from “mass tourism,” instead focusing on alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism and community-based tourism. Today, the question can even be asked, “[w]hy are anthropologists paying so much attention to alternative forms of tourism?” (Stronza 2001, 274). Indeed, the negative tone towards tourism seems to have shifted to a largely positive one in this recent trend of studies, emphasizing alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism and CBT (e.g., West and Carrier 2004; Salazar

2012a). Overall, anthropologists must recognize tourism's significance in the global economy and its social and cultural impacts, as transnational transport and new means communication methods connect isolated places to the global economy, influencing most societies worldwide (Stronza 2001, 264).

Rural and Community-based Tourism

Community-based tourism is relevant if it has a consistent effect on the configuration of community, otherwise it can become a mere euphemism for conventional forms of tourism.

Esteban Ruiz-Ballesteros *What community for community-based tourism?* (2023, 2675)

Two strands of research referred to in the previous sections—ethicalization and development—are the most important trends influencing the emergence of alternative tourism, of which CBT and rural tourism are part. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, rural tourism is defined as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing” (UNWTO, n.d.-a). “Rural” refers to tourism activities that take place in areas with low population density, where farming and forestry shape the landscape and traditional social structures are present. Bernard Lane traces rural tourism's roots back to romanticism's values of contact with nature and appreciation of folklore, which developed as an antidote to industrialization (Lane 2009).

The unique strength of rural tourism is that so-called underdeveloped areas in the periphery become revitalized through tourism. However, Lane adds that there needs to be a balance between economic growth and sustainability in rural areas (ibid., 357). He notes the influence of post-Fordist forms of production, with rural and increasingly female entrepreneurs taking

leading roles in the service industries and utilizing new information technologies (ibid., 360). Community-based tourism can be seen as a part of this trend in alternative “pro-poor” tourism (Jamal and Dredge 2014, 6). It emphasizes the ethical component even more, claiming to be a type of tourism “consistent with natural, social, and community values and which allows both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences” (Eadington and Smith 1992, 3 quoted in Stronza 2001, 274).

In contrast to rural tourism’s focus on individual entrepreneurs, as the name already suggests, CBT is centered around the *community*. Local community members own and control CBT, participating in decision-making processes, allocating their own resources, marketing their products, and sharing and distributing their economic benefits while carrying larger community benefits (Okazaki 2008; Goodwin and Santilli 2009). According to these authors, CBT’s defining purpose is to alleviate inequality and poverty through its principal mechanism of local ownership and control. This is opposed to mass tourism, which excludes disadvantaged people from equal participation in the market, instead exploiting unskilled labor. However, the extent of “community participation” in any arena can be difficult to assess.

Arnstein (1969) provided the most widely accepted model for citizen participation, which led some researchers, such as Okazaki (2008) and Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012, 37), to create models of the scale of local ownership and participation regarding CBT. While adapting these models 1:1 is not the aim of this research, it is important to keep in mind that CBT projects around the globe show a lot of variability concerning the level to which they are community owned and managed, dependent on outside donors, or just participating in certain processes (Goodwin and Santilli 2009). The most widely used definition of empowerment in CBT comes from Regina Scheyvens (1999), who splits it into several dimensions: Economic empowerment

“brings lasting economic gains to a local community” (ibid., 247); psychological empowerment enhances the self-esteem of members including “traditionally low-status sectors of society e.g. women, youths” (ibid.); social empowerment fosters community cohesion; and political empowerment concerns decision-making abilities.

On another level, community-based tourism seeks to “[...] establish direct personal intercultural connections between host and guest” (Dernoi 1988, 89 quoted in Pearce 1992, 18). Thus, in contrast to mass tourism, CBT values the work of the hosts more, as it doesn’t get “hidden,” but rather becomes part of the touristic experience (Wearing and McDonald 2002). Furthermore, community-based ecotourism, sometimes called CBET, links CBT to environmental conservation (Kiss 2004). Like ecotourism, this model aims to foster conservation while ensuring social sustainability by generating income from these conservation efforts. However, there are significant critiques of community-based tourism when it comes to the commodification of “human environmental relationships” (Jamal and Dredge 2014, 10), as well as of cultural groups (Salazar 2012a, 16–7).

While economists have critiqued CBT as often not being economically sustainable (e.g., Asker 2010; Goodwin and Santilli 2009), while in some cases, the absence of CBT communities from the wider tourism market can be noted, with the intended outcome of maintaining their independence (Goodwin and Santilli 2009, 11). Anthropologists meanwhile have taken aim at the functionalist approach to “community involvement,” homogenizing the host communities and neglecting structural constraints hindering local control of tourist infrastructure (e.g., Blackstock 2005). In addition, Western conceptions of community involvement may lead to the diminishing of traditional knowledge (Wearing and McDonald 2002). Further anthropological critiques of CBT have questioned the claims of CBT to distribute power,

showing that it is often seized by existing elites (Dolezal and Novelli 2022). Although CBT universally acknowledges empowerment and participation as its main guiding principles, most projects face significant challenges in fully realizing them (Goodwin and Santilli 2009; Dangi and Jamal 2016; Giampiccoli and Mtapuri 2020). Also, some authors argue that community-based tourism, while originally presenting an antidote to the framework of neoliberal capitalism, is increasingly co-opted by it (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri 2012).

Salazar (2012a) posed the question of whether it is possible or even desirable to achieve local control and consensus-based decision-making, given that no community's aims are homogeneous and conflicts inevitably arise, and because a significant portion of control still remains in the hands of the developers. In theory, CBT's premise of local involvement and community ownership screams for being subjected to anthropological scrutiny. And indeed, the growing numbers of studies on this topic suggest its growing relevance for anthropologists. As will become apparent in the later chapters, I initially set out to specifically study CBT in Kyrgyzstan. During my research stay, however, I discovered that this would not give a holistic picture of rural tourism in the country. While CBT "opened" the country to alternative modes of travel, nowadays it remains a relatively closed off group in a wider field of rural tourism. By incorporating the latter—independent rural tourism operators and homestay owners—into my analysis, I hope to provide context for understanding CBT's uniqueness, or lack thereof, and to highlight this change in the country's contemporary tourism landscape.

3: Methodology

This chapter aims to provide an overview of my research methodology, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. Additionally, I provide space for contemplation on my personal biases that shaped my research, along with a discussion about ethics and the limitations of this study. Firstly, it is important to note that while I conducted my research independently and was not involved with a larger project team, my affiliation with the University of Central Asia (UCA) during my stay in Kyrgyzstan, and the use of their resources and network of researchers, made my research possible. I had already established contact with the UCA before arriving in Kyrgyzstan, as this institutional connection was essential for applying for the University of Vienna's KWA stipend. This stipend provided me with the financial resources to conduct my research stay of three months, from September to the end of November 2023.

Fieldwork and Documentation

Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique.

James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture* (1988, 13)

Naturally, I did not enter the field without prior knowledge about Kyrgyzstan and the research topic of rural and community-based tourism. Acknowledging that I am a subject with my own opinions and motivations and not merely a “fly on the wall or a purely objective observer” (De Munck and Sobo 1998, 22), there were certain assumptions that I carried with me to Kyrgyzstan. Whether I liked it or not, some of my assumptions were purely Orientalist, like

imagining Kyrgyzstan as a land of unspoiled natural beauty, teeming with flocks of sheep, herds of horses, and a nomadic culture, or a place requiring further development from the outside. The ability of ethnography to act as an instrument for representation of an absolute reality has been the object of continued anthropological critique since the 1980s, which strongly influenced the ways in which researchers talked about culture, the culture of writing ethnographically in the first place, as well as the construction of culture through this practice (Clifford and Marcus [1986] 2010).

Studying tourism is an interesting anthropological task in this history, as it already presents an uprooting of the fixation on a “pure field site” inherent to prior anthropological traditions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 11–12). The statements of my interlocutors and interviewees, some of which I agree with more than others, play a central role in this thesis. I take the differences between their views and mine not as a critique of a different worldview but rather as a point of departure for better mutual understanding. My own roles were shifting all throughout the many encounters along the way and certainly influenced how my interlocutors behaved and spoke with me, in turn influencing my own reflections on the interactions. As hinted at in the introduction, I alternated between being a tourist, a student, and a researcher, and my interlocutors occasionally perceived me as an “expert.” My position as a male European, despite my young age, undoubtedly contributed to receiving more respect and attention than I otherwise would have.

I aim to incorporate and specifically highlight my own perspective on the intersubjectivity of my field encounters, striving towards what some have referred to as “radical empiricism” (i.e., Jackson 1989). By “the field,” I don’t mean a strictly localized, bounded location in the Kyrgyz mountains, but rather the social field I entered during my research in Kyrgyzstan, shaped by

my presence and interactions, as well as how others perceived me (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). During my initial weeks of research, I established key contacts that opened up this social field. Of particular note is Chris Gerry, Dean of the Graduate School of Development at the UCA Bishkek, who introduced me to the UCA staff as well as suggested I visit Naryn during the time of a film festival, where I would make lots more contacts. He also introduced me to Surekha Ghogale, working for the AKDN, who became my primary contact in Naryn and connected me to multiple people in the city, ranging from professors to guesthouse owners.

Gulira Kenjekaraeva, coordinator of CBT Naryn, introduced me to the local CBT group, arranged for me to stay in CBT guesthouses, and allowed me to spend some days in their Naryn office to get familiar with their daily business. With the critiques of traditional ethnography in mind, I intended to retain the valuable aspects of fieldwork: countering ethnocentrism, valuing the intimate knowledge of marginalized people, describing social routines, informal knowledge, and embodied practices, and the self-conscious shifting of one's own perspective through changing social and geographical locations (ibid., 36–37). Or, as Matthew Carey, a professor I was fortunate to have as an exchange student in Copenhagen, told the class, ethnographic fieldwork on other continents is valuable simply because, apart from anthropologists, “no one else is doing it.” And without it, we would lose a vital vehicle for cross-cultural understanding.

Data Collection Methods

As Maarja Kaaristo has noted, when anthropologically studying tourism, long-term participant observation is only possible for certain topics, mainly if one focuses on the hosts in a strict location (Kaaristo 2018, 77). Calling for reflexive and critical ethnography that is often missing in tourism studies, Kaaristo promotes a (Eastern) European approach of “back and forth” field

visits instead of the traditional “long-term stay” when studying the inherently mobile and temporal phenomenon that is tourism. My approach to doing ethnography is in congruence with the one presented by Kaaristo, prioritizing “more targeted interviews, with concentrated, intensive observations” (ibid.). Thus, while long term participant observation was not the mainstay of my research, I include some of my ethnographic writings about these interactions and observation, to make my more analytic writing “accessible” (Geertz 1973, 14). These I present in the form of “ethnographic vignettes,” interspersed throughout the main body of the paper (see Schöneich 2021; Bloom-Christen and Grunow 2022).

Their function is also to guide the reader through my realization process in the field and provide vital context for conclusions drawn from interviews. As James Clifford writes, participant observation moves constantly “between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts” (Clifford 1988, 34). I only started the writing process of these vignettes after my stay, using hasty notes and more structured “memos” I had drafted before, while relying heavily on the book “Alive in the Writing” by Kirin Narayan (2012). In this book, the author gives practical advice on writing lively ethnographies, including providing “prompts” to get started with writing, while heavily drawing on Anton Chekhov’s ([1895] 2019) ethnographic work on the island of Sakhalin for inspiration.

However, the mainstay of my data comes from semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann 2020). Svend Brinkmann describes the distinctions between types of qualitative interviews as existing on a “continuum ranging from relatively structured to relatively unstructured formats” (ibid., 435). This type of interview takes into account the “conversational” character of the world, being through our interactions with others, in that it allows the interviewees to “raise

questions and concerns in their own words and from their own perspectives” (ibid.). As its name suggests, the semi-structured interview is also not completely without structure, and does not seek a narration of a life story as an outcome; rather, its purpose is to obtain descriptions of certain topics. All in all, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews during the course of my stay, and one online interview after returning home. The details on the interviews are listed in table c.) in the Appendix. As my research question focuses on the intersections of tourism workers and intermediaries, with development workers being a prime example, I had participants from a wide range of backgrounds.

Thus, I adjusted the interview questions accordingly. The problematic aspect of “classifying” my interviewees into different categories, has to do with generalization. Some of my interlocutors belong to two or more “categories,” for instance working in public-private partnerships, both as developers and tour operators. Keeping this shortcoming regarding the classification of interviewees in mind, the primary roles that my interviewees took towards me are also listed in table c.). In conjunction with the data gathered from participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I also conducted a quantitative survey targeting tourists. This survey, the questions of which are listed in table h.) in the Appendix, aimed to systematize and juxtapose insights gleaned from numerous informal dialogues with tourists. Initially, I refrained from explicitly interviewing tourists, as they did not constitute the primary focus of my investigation, presuming that informal interactions would suffice for capturing broad sentiments and motivations. However, prompted by rereading a paper by Amanda Stronza (2001), I recognized the necessity for additional empirical insights into tourist perspectives.

She argued that when it comes to “what motivates tourists (i.e., the psychosocial factors, material conditions, etc.), several scholars have posited generalizable theories [...] [y]et,

relatively little empirical data has been analyzed to support or refute such theories” (Stronza 2001, 263). This led me to think of questions to tourists and publish the survey specifically aimed at tourists in an online forum of travelers of Central Asia (Caravanistan.com), as well as to forward it to a WhatsApp group of tourists that I had encountered during my first month in Kyrgyzstan. Still, since this survey is not the mainstay of my data and is limited in scope, with only eleven responses, I define the methods used in this thesis as purely qualitative. Lastly, this research drew extensively upon existing literature in the anthropology of tourism, community-based tourism, and Kyrgyzstan, among other relevant subjects. Asylbek Rajiev, the director of KCBTA, facilitated access to specific documents from CBT Kyrgyzstan, Jekatarina Rudolf provided reports on GIZ’s development programs, and Surekha Ghogale sourced the “Naryn Integrated Habitat Assessment” report about the NURP project.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interviews warrant a later interpretation of meaning (Brinkmann 2020). First, to make sense of ambiguities and contradictions that necessarily occur between different views of the same topic or even within the same person’s accounts (ibid., 439). Second, Geertz argues that in a hermeneutic tradition, interpretive anthropology seeks to highlight the social and personal meanings within the interpreted discourses while remaining “essentially contestable,” as opposed to positivism (Guest et al. 2012, 15). To facilitate interpretation, all of my semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed in the qualitative-research program “NVIVO 14,” and an explorative thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted (Guest et al. 2012, 7). In contrast to trying to test a hypothesis through my interviews, I mostly asked questions to understand what different people thought about

certain topics. During the analysis process, I established codes based on content, repetition, and novelty (ibid., 85).

I re-read and listened to the interviews, initially categorizing the texts into sections and posing the question, “What are the examples of these statements in relation to your research questions?” Initial codes surfaced, which I subsequently refined into more concrete ones. I defined these codes more precisely and compared them across multiple interviews. From these codes I then developed *themes*, which are defined as defined as “unit[s] of meaning” as opposed to codes, which are “a textual description of the semantic boundaries of a theme or a component of a theme” (ibid., 51). Using this approach, I grouped the views and opinions of my interviewees and interpreted them in the context of their statements. I later constructed the analytical chapters of this thesis around the discovered themes. During my research stay, I was able to listen to all of my interviews multiple times and transcribe them. This was crucial because it enabled me to revisit the interviews shortly after they took place and seek clarifications in certain situations.

Additionally, conducting the first few interviews allowed me to refine my questions for the following interviews. One of the largest changes to the overall research question was the inclusion of independent guesthouses not part of CBT, leading me to include “rural tourism” in the thesis title. This allowed me to both get an “outsider’s perspective” on CBT and further explore the theme I had developed around how tourism trends in Kyrgyzstan were changing. As anticipated, the thematic analysis uncovered my interviewees’ practical application of the abstract concept of community in various contexts, including their interactions with other tourism actors and groups. Another topic that would influence my research question surfaced when I observed that a significant number of interviewees from various backgrounds

expressed concerns about the sustainability of tourism. This realization led me to incorporate additional questions on this topic in later interviews.

While I initially did not set out to study ecotourism issues, through thematic analysis I realized that environmental “values” were an idea connecting these environmental concerns to the questions of community and culture that I intended to answer. Since value and values are easily conflated terms, Arild Wæraas provides crucial guidance on conducting value research using thematic analysis, which involves distilling information and categorizing synonyms (Wæraas 2022). Conversely, some themes also had to be excluded. As the volume of my thesis grew, I realized my research question could not encompass everything I found of interest. Mainly, the chapter in which I had intended to include my reflections on the larger societal impacts that the advent of cultural tourism and CBT in Kyrgyzstan in conjunction with an increasing nationalism based on traditional culture brought with it, although some of these findings found their way into the concluding chapters of the thesis.

Ethical Considerations and Research Limitations

During my research, I followed the ethical research guidelines of the German Society for Social and Cultural Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association (Hahn et al. 2019; American Anthropological Association, n.d.). Of course, it is not as straightforward as that, as ethnographic research brings with it immense ethical dilemmas. Thus, having already discussed my positionality within the field, I want to briefly bring up one point here: “Weighing” competing ethical obligations between individual research participants, especially considering vulnerable populations or positions, as well as the obligation to stay faithful to my research objectives. Although all my research participants consented to the use and depiction

of their real names in my paper, my initial concerns stemmed from the cases of three guesthouse owners in Naryn City. The reasons for this will become evident in the vignette, “The Exclusivity of Community.” In short, my dilemma was due to their suspicions and allegations directed at other participants in my research. For this reason, I considered anonymizing their names after the fact but ultimately decided against it. In the end, it was a mere question of differing opinions on a topic, and all interviewees had given their consent and partly even explicitly stated that they wished that their controversial opinions be heard. Thus, I will keep their real names, as is becoming more common in ethnography in general (see Weiss and McGranahan 2021).

The biggest limitation of my research was, without a doubt, my inadequate Russian language skills. At the point of arriving in Kyrgyzstan, I had only studied Russian for seven months in advance and at too low a frequency to hold any complex conversations. During my stay, I continued taking language classes three times a week, which helped me in my daily life but didn’t influence my interviews. As I was aware of this shortcoming from the start, I chose to focus on tourism, especially tourism developers, since they would be more likely to speak English. In the end, three of my interviews were conducted in Russian.⁴ In one instance, I was prepared that my interlocutor didn’t speak English and asked a student of the UCA Naryn to translate for me during the interview in exchange for compensation. In another instance, the interviewees brought a translator with them, and in another case, I only learned that the interview would take place in Russian upon my arrival. Thus, I had to translate my interview

⁴ The interviews with Jamal, with the professors of the Naryn State University, and with Nurbek, head of KATO—see table c.) in the Appendix.

questions on the spot, using an online translator, and only later asked a student to translate the answers to English.

The scope of this research was inherently restricted due to it being a master's thesis and my own limited experience. As already explained, a longer-term stay in a single location might not have been beneficial for some of the questions I intended to answer. However, for other questions, such as the principle "search for community," a longer field stay would have been necessary to really "dig deep" and gain tacit knowledge and understandings that were barred from me due to not having a more intimate connection to my research participants, especially the tourism hosts, and witnessing their daily interactions. As it proved difficult to ask abstract questions about community, a longer participant observation would have been beneficial for following this direction of the research. Lastly, as the focus on values to explain findings related to the interaction of development and host actors, as well as sustainable tourism, only emerged relatively late in the course of the research stay, I was not able to ask many directed questions on this topic in the interviews, but rather interpreted related statements after the fact, using value as a guiding metaphor. Keeping these shortcomings in mind, it is now time to move on to the main part of the thesis.

4: Kyrgyzstan: Country Profile and Historical Forms of Tourism

This chapter introduces the reader to Kyrgyzstan as the research site for this paper, providing vital background information. While I do not aim to further develop the theoretical distinctions between different tourism types outlined in Chapter 2 here, instead I want to examine Kyrgyzstan's unique situation as a tourism destination and its historical roots. Tourism contributed around 5% of the country's total GDP before the pandemic, and its importance for economic growth is being increasingly recognized (UNDP 2022). Today, the majority of tourists come from neighboring CIS countries such as Kazakhstan and Russia, with the highest non-CIS tourist numbers coming from Turkey, China, and the EU (Jenish 2018, 12). However, those numbers may be muddled because people from neighboring countries can enter on a tourist visa while visiting friends and relatives (*ibid.*, 32). According to the Kyrgyz National Statistical Committee (KNSC) the number of leisure tourists in 2022 was 1.97 million (KNSC 2022).

Nazgul Jenish (2018) divides the types of tourism in Kyrgyzstan into three distinct categories: "Issyk-Kul lake beach tourism," "cultural and soft adventure tourism," and "extreme sports and hard adventure tourism." I will not go into the latter here, which primarily takes the form of guided expeditions to Kyrgyzstan's high mountains, a practice that dates back to Soviet times. Instead, in this chapter, I will look at mass tourism, primarily found at Lake Issyk-Kul. While this will not be the focus of the rest of the paper, which is concerned with alternative tourism forms specifically aimed at international tourists from the global north, it is important for me to bring it up here because this type of tourism still dwarfs the more alternative forms in terms of numbers and because it is so intimately tied to the history of Kyrgyzstan.

Introduction to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked, mountainous country in Central Asia whose complex geography and history significantly influence its political, economic, and ethnic dynamics. Geographically, the country can be divided roughly into northern and southern regions, separated by the Tian Shan mountain ranges (Allworth and Sinor 2024). Its landscapes are dominated by mountains and high steppes. Bordering Uzbekistan, and sporting many ex- and enclaves of both countries, the Fergana Valley is significantly flatter and more fertile than the rest of the country, making it the most population-dense area. According to the latest census, Kyrgyzstan has a total population of 7,037,600 inhabitants (KNSC 2023). The climate can be said to be strictly continental, due to the country's distance from all of the world's oceans. Yet it differs greatly from valleys to mountains, with the more populated valleys having hot and dry summers, averaging up to 28°C, and cold winters, with an average of -18°C in January.

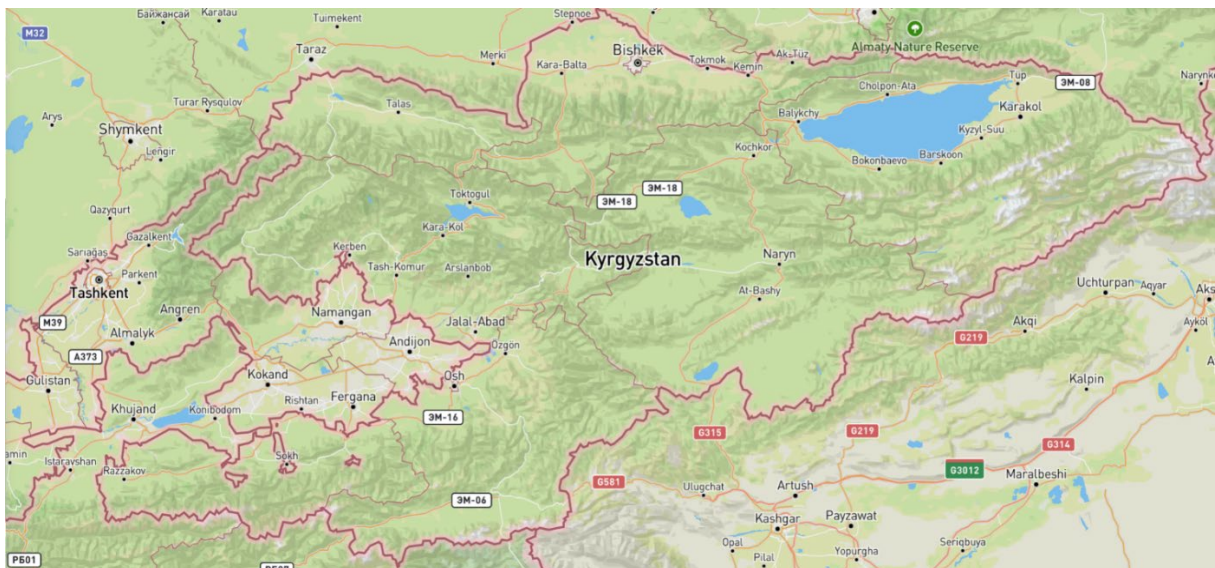


Figure 1: Map of Kyrgyzstan. © mapbox © openstreetmaps

The name “Kyrgyzstan” dates back to the Manas Epos. In the 9th century, the national hero united 40 tribes under one banner to fight the encroaching Uyghurs—“kyrk,” meaning forty in Kyrgyz, and “uuz,” meaning tribes—coining the modern name Kyrgyzstan in combination with the Persian word “stan,” meaning land or country (Hiro 2009, 291). Kyrgyzstan has a rich nomadic history and culture, with millennia of tribal rule preserving shamanic traditions well into the 1600s (Allworth and Sinor 2024). In the 18th century, the Kyrgyz, who by then didn’t see themselves as “one people” yet, were conquered first by the Manchu empire and later the Khanate of Kokand. By the mid-1900s, most of Central Asia fell under Russian Tsarist rule (Khalid 2021). The imperial conquests ceased at the border with Afghanistan, where the British negotiated a new frontier at the end of the period now known as “The Great Game” (ibid., 84-5). Among the other territories in Central Asia, or what was then called Turkestan, Kyrgyzstan became a Soviet Republic in 1924 following a hasty redrawing of borders (Khalid 2021, 209).

The Soviets brought with them a heaping of ideology and were keen on establishing “nations” in Central Asia with their distinct cultures. Communal farms, or Kolkhozes, were created in a harsh break from the nomadic pastoralism that shaped the ways of life in most of Kyrgyzstan up to that point. Factories were developed, and planned cities raised from the ground. The Kyrgyz, as many other cultures, came to increasingly define themselves in terms of socialist modernity, yet never forgetting their heritage (see Mozur 1982). After reaching independence in 1991 and drafting its constitution in 1993, the country became officially known as the Kyrgyz Republic. The mountainous landscape, combined with the influence of the Soviet period—most notably the drawing of the borders—has fostered cultural differences between the northern and southern regions. After independence, the Russian minority in Kyrgyzstan decreased by almost half (Ferrando 2008, 497-98).

This also catapulted the Uzbeks to becoming the biggest minority in Kyrgyzstan, which their political leaders used in an effort to mobilize for their own rights, especially around the allowance to use Uzbek in official interactions and to be taught in school (ibid., 509). Southern Kyrgyzstan, especially the Ferghana Valley, holds most ethnic Uzbeks, who are the largest minority with 14.2% (Allworth and Sinor 2024). In contrast, northern Kyrgyzstan has had greater historical Russian influence, with most living in the capital of Bishkek, where Russian is still the principal language of everyday life. However, their population is still shrinking, decreasing in the last 15 years from 8.7% to now 4.1% (ibid.). Kyrgyzstan is a majority Muslim country overall, with the noteworthy exception of Russian Orthodoxy, and has become increasingly traditional since independence (J. Anderson 1999b).

This religiosity is present more strongly in Kyrgyzstan's southern part, where "messy borders" result in conflicts around strategic resources with neighboring nations (Reeves 2014). These geographical and cultural divides, paired with traditional categories of clan and tribe, play a key role in the country's politics today, with regional identities often impacting public debates and voter decisions (Light 2018). Since independence, the Manas epos has become the identifying force of Kyrgyz nationality, and it is now used to proclaim the unified existence of Kyrgyzstan over time (Khalid 2021, 470). In the 1990s, the country had been called Central Asia's "island of democracy" (J. Anderson 1999a), since its government was significantly more democratic and its society more pluralistic than that of its post-Soviet neighbors. Yet, to put it mildly, "Kyrgyzstan has proven itself to be the most politicized country in Central Asia" (Beyer 2013, 3). Revolutionary uprisings and ethnic violence have shaped the first two decades after its independence (Reeves 2014).

While ethnic violence has largely ceased, ever more escalating border clashes with neighboring Tajikistan have made headlines in the last few years (Wood and Khashimov 2022). Overall, Kyrgyzstan has a worrying human rights status. Especially freedom of expression is in danger, as examples of imprisoned journalists and completely forbidding peaceful protests for some time show (HRW 2024). Also, significant violence against women and increasing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity can be observed. Relevant for this thesis, the “foreign agent’s law” made many of my interlocutors working in NGOs or international development organizations fear for the future of their work since this law—directly inspired by Russia—makes it possible for every foreign worker to be labeled a “spy” (Wood 2024). Still Kyrgyzstan’s closest ally, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin made his first trip after his international arrest warrant to the Central Asian country (Reuters 2023).

Sadyr Japarov, Kyrgyzstan’s current president, came to power amidst the overthrow of the previous candidate due to election scandals and immediately tightened his grip on Kyrgyzstan by amending the constitution to extend his rights as president. Despite not following through on his claims to rectify his predecessors’ widespread “corruption, nepotism, and links to criminality” (ibid., 14) but rather following in their footsteps, he is largely viewed positively by the population. Primarily, this is due to his mastery of “tradition-centered politics” and his success in his long-fought battle to nationalize the Kumtor gold company. After Kyrgyzstan’s independence in 1991, the Soviet subsidies suddenly vanished, creating massive inflation and lasting economic hardship (Hiro 2009, 290). Nowadays, even though the country has made huge strides in reducing poverty, still 20% of the population is living below the national poverty line, which sits at 3.65 dollars per day (World Bank 2020).

As many Kyrgyz people choose to migrate and work in Russia (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008), China invests heavily in the country, being its main creditor and trade-partner (Colville 2023). The main industries are agriculture and livestock, mining for resources, especially gold and coal, as well as more recently textiles (Allworth and Sinor 2024). Based on IMF data, the World Bank estimates that remittances make up 31.1% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP (World Bank 2020a). As a result, the post-socialist state is among the top three countries receiving the most individual remittances worldwide.⁵ This comes with massive and complicated socio-economic implications for its inhabitants, like the "loosening of family bonds, brain drain, migrants being employed below their skill levels, and integration problems in the receiving countries" (Batsaikhan and Dabrowski 2017, 314).

Cholpon-Ata: A Soviet Era Resort Town

Cholpon-Ata began as a farming cooperative on the north shore of Lake Issyk-Kul in the year 1922 (Schreiber and Flechtner 2023, 204). In 1938, the first sanatorium was developed here to treat children suffering from tuberculosis. However, the north shore of the lake soon saw the establishment of touristic resorts. Dating back to Soviet times, the lake is also part of a protected nature reserve (Palmer 2009, 7). Issyk-Kul, the second-biggest alpine lake in the world, holds great cultural significance for the Kyrgyz people (ibid., 6-7). There are several myths about sunken cities in this "hot" lake (meaning never-freezing due to its saline nature), as well as the lake itself reportedly being too sacred for many Kyrgyz to bathe in. Along the southern shore of the lake ran the northernmost branch of the Silk Road, which continued to

⁵ It is important to note, that this increase in migrant labor primarily took hold in the second decade after independence – the 2000's (Reeves 2014, 126).

Urumqi in modern-day China. Palmer, searching for the “pre-communist” origins of tourism in Kyrgyzstan, writes that the region’s biggest lakes, with Issyk-Kul prime among them, were always places of seasonal migration due to their abundance of fresh water and grazing opportunities (ibid., 9). Although it may be a stretch to liken seasonal migration to tourism, Palmer asserts that ancient legends attribute a sacred quality to Issyk-Kul Lake, imbuing it with a deeper meaning, while today the lake is a symbol for holidaymaking for the Kyrgyz people.

Since the countries of Central Asia are among the most landlocked in the world, they call this lake their „sea.” Because the opportunity for a beach holiday in the region is rare, Cholpon-Ata’s population of around 14,000 triples every year during the summer tourist season, lasting approximately from June until the end of August (Schreiber and Flechtner 2023, 204-5). In addition to the beach, numerous parks, and tree-planted avenues, the local museum preserves a field of petroglyphs dating back over three millennia. But most domestic and regional tourists are here for its beaches and karaoke bars. Or, in the words of the Lonely Planet, “by day there’s tanning bods, zipping jet skis and ice-cream-licking tots; by night it’s open-air cafes, thumping discos and young lovers breaking social mores” (Mayhew et al. 2014, 255). However, the famous travel guide also echoes what I experienced first-hand, which is that for the typical Western tourist, this beach spectacle is mundane at best.

Most tourists from Europe and the U.S. come here on their way to the popular hiking destinations near Karakol and might stop to look at the petroglyphs or join a horse trek in the nearby mountains. Thus, the various excursions (*ekskursii*) offered almost at every corner are a typical sight on Cholpon-Atas tourist-packed streets, catering to both foreign and domestic tourists. Again, the type of tourism found in Cholpon-Ata is in many ways the antithesis of the type of tourism that is the focus of this thesis. Yet I chose to introduce it here because, in terms

of tourist numbers, it is still more influential than rural and community-based tourism. Also, the type of tourism found in Cholpon-Ata was frequently used by my research contacts to distinguish CBT from other forms of tourism. For instance, Asylbek, referring to Cholpon-Ata, the heart of Issyk-Kul beach tourism, said: “It’s another kind of tourism; we don’t do it. Yeah. It’s mass tourism.”⁶



Figure 2: Excursions on display in Cholpon-Ata.

Beach Holidays and Karaoke Bars

I arrived in Cholpon-Ata on a late August evening in a marshrutka (minibus) from Bishkek, looking forward to a few quiet days at the beach. However, my German travel guide that I had bought back in Munich had this to say about Cholpon-Ata: “He who wants to relax in peace here should search another place” (Schreiber and Flechtner 2023, 204, translated by the author). At night, Cholpon-Ata comes alive. And indeed, when I arrived there after 10 p.m., I

⁶ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

found the town still very much awake, and had no problem at all to find a guesthouse despite the late hour. After three weeks of travel, I arrived there quite tired and was not in the mood for a party. It was during the week, and I had been awake since 6 in the morning, but the city clearly operated on a different rhythm. As I stumbled through a maze of rickety houses and unpaved streets, each streaming with light and laughter, responding to the distant beats and rhythms from the next karaoke bar, I felt myself catapulted onto another planet.

After all, my previous nights had taken place on grassy meadows, either in a yurt or my own tent, gazing up towards a starry night's sky. And, as the travel guide had rightly warned, it was not until the early morning hours that the town really went to sleep. The next day, I discovered that, while I had already paid for breakfast, it wasn't served until 10 a.m. That day, I relocated to a different guesthouse with no shortage of options. This new guesthouse seemed peaceful and serene at first, situated within a lush green garden. However, come night, yet again the karaoke songs blared through my windows, as if mocking my idea of a calm beach holiday. While in Cholpon-Ata I staunchly refused to take part in the late-night activities, later during my time in Bishkek I was dragged into such bars on more than one occasion, and time and time again discovered the great passion of Kyrgyz people for singing.

Having traversed Kyrgyzstan for nearly three weeks, both solo and in company, using marshrutkas, shared taxis, and my bicycle, I arrived in Cholpon-Ata as a final destination before deciding to settle down in the capital and commence my research. While my travels had been both exciting and tiring, staying in Cholpon-Ata allowed me to witness a type of tourism that I had not yet experienced. During the first weeks of travel, I encountered mostly European and a few Russian and American tourists. However, in this resort town seeming to have fallen out

of time, I stood out as the only Westerner enjoying the beach or dining at one of the numerous restaurants and thus received more attention than in more remote parts of the country.



Figure 3: A typical beach scene in Cholpon-Ata.

Soviet Era Mass-Tourism and its Legacies

The Soviet vacation did not provide an escape from the mobilization of citizens toward a common goal. From its beginning it was a continuation of that mobilization using an alternate setting.

Diane P. Koenker *Whose Right to Rest* (2009, 401–2)

Urry and Larsen, writing on the emergence of working-class holidays in the 1900s, speak of a “rationalization of leisure” that went alongside the rationalization of the workplace as a segregated domain from the rest of life, bounded through time and space (Urry and Larsen 2011, 34-35). The idea that leisure increases productivity is thus not exclusively Soviet. Rather, it developed alongside mass tourism, following the emergence of a working class. The re-interpretation of the importance of a place, such as the marking out of Lake Issyk-Kul as a

tourism destination, is “central to the growing ‘economy of signs’ of an industrial economy” (ibid. 48). After the disastrous events of the Second World War, this imagination of a better place within each citizen’s reach, even if the workers never actually traveled there, became an important narrative to lift spirits and morale (Gorsuch 2011, 27). Tourism in the Soviet Union developed into a “mass movement,” already planned by the authorities in the 1920s but realized only in the 1960s and 1970s. Under Stalin, foreign exchanges, even in the form of letters, were heavily restricted (ibid., 30). Domestic tourism, however, was encouraged.

Travelers’ freedom increased further at the start of the Khrushchev era, as international tourism to the capitalist West became legalized. As the Soviet Union faded, attitudes toward tourism progressively shifted towards more openness, along with a decay of Stalinist ideology (Palmer 2009, 11). The Issyk-Kul trade union resorts attracted upwards of 350,000 travelers per year in the 1980s (ibid.). Workers were supposed to come there from all over the USSR, not only to rest in order to get back to work invigorated but also to witness far-away Soviet republics that were so different in cultural and ethnic markers yet united by the same governing principles. Thus, tourism became an act of patriotism (ibid., 9). Additionally, the fact that tourists traveled principally as a group was meant to raise the collective consciousness of people participating in these packaged tours (ibid., 10). Returning to Issyk-Kul, the lake’s “unspoiled setting” and “unpolluted water” are cited as the reasons it became one of the Soviet Union’s most popular tourist destinations (ibid., 11).

The film “Castles in the Sand” (sometimes translated as “Sand Castles”) provides an impression of what vacations at Issyk-Kul looked like in the 1960s (Bronstein and Vidugiris 1967). It is one of the most famous and frequently quoted Kyrgyz documentary films produced during the Soviet era. This is partly due to the iconic scenes of beach holidays in the “All Union Health

Resort,” which show the Russian tourists being ferried around on the lake, complete with a music orchestra, or otherwise relaxing on the shore in time-typical striped bathing suits. The film also became known for the subtle tones of anticolonial criticism it voiced against the cultural supremacy of ethnic Russians. It portrays the struggle of a young boy constructing sand castles at the beach, supposedly representing Kyrgyz culture and innovation. The Russian tourists first wonder at the strange boy, then end up overtaking his creative venture and destroying the castle to construct a replica of a human figure lying on the beach, symbolizing a particular version of Kyrgyzstan’s future being enforced through Russian ideology.



Figure 4: Scene from “Castles in the Sand.”

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Issyk-Kul and Cholpon-Ata maintained their significance in Kyrgyz tourism, both in terms of numbers and symbolism, as evidenced by the city’s current status as the official holiday residence of the Kyrgyz president and its historical hosting of Boris Yeltsin. Economically, the north shore of Issyk-Kul remains prominent in Kyrgyz tourism, with nearly half of Kyrgyzstan’s resorts located there (Jenish 2018, 14). Of the 1.97

million leisure tourists visiting Kyrgyzstan annually (KNSC 2022), it is hard to gauge how many of them visit Issyk-Kul, with numbers quoted from the Ministry of Tourism as high as 900,000 (Ashimov 2019)⁷. After the Soviet Union health resorts closed, the hotel industry became largely privatized. Cholpon-Ata today hosts a sprawling expanse of guesthouses, ranging in degrees of officiality. Mainly small, family-owned guesthouses (*gostevoi dom*) line the streets, though bigger hotels with a steeper price tag exist as well. According to Judith Kloiber (2008, 38), 90% of Cholpon-Ata's formerly state-owned enterprises are now privatized, with some notable exceptions like the "Avrora" Sanatorium.

Even though the accommodation is now more decentralized, the population of Cholpon-Ata tripling during each holiday season presents a clear indicator of mass tourism. Unsurprisingly, this brings problems of overtourism, particularly in the form of violent or improper behavior by partying tourists, as a range of news articles published during my stay in Kyrgyzstan made evident (Dzhumashova 2023). Cholpon-Ata also hosted the first three editions of the World Nomad Games, which I will go into later, further increasing the city's symbolic importance. However, despite hosting this spectacular celebration of nomadic culture, several tourism guides and locals I spoke to unequivocally advised me to avoid Cholpon-Ata and instead travel along the more natural south shore of the lake or to Naryn Oblast, which is considered the "most Kyrgyz" province of the country if I wanted to experience the "real" Kyrgyzstan. The relevance of this chapter was to illustrate this "other" type of tourism and its historical roots in order to better understand alternative tourism in the following chapters.

⁷ Kloiber (2008, 38) comments on the large disparity between official numbers, as published by the KNSC and the Ministry of Tourism, ranging in 2004 from roughly 400,000 to 900,000 respectively.

5: The Rise of Alternative Tourism

In recent years, Issyk-Kul province has developed a large repertoire of alternative tourism (Kloiber 2008, 42-7). Numerous research participants cited the CBT community at Bokonbaevo, on the south shore of Issyk-Kul, as one of the best-developing and most innovative rural tourism destinations in the entire country. Steve Borchardt also writes about this discrepancy in the tourism industries between the two shores of Issyk-Kul, stating that while tourism on the north shore still operates similarly to the Soviet period, the south now increasingly attracts Western tourists (Borchardt 2018, 71). This is part of a larger trend, as Kyrgyzstan is increasingly becoming known for “alternative tourism,” such as nature and adventure tourism, following the establishment of several CBT groups in 2003 (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010).

This chapter will turn away from Lake Issyk-Kul, tracing the history and development of rural and community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. It will become evident how the establishment of CBT in the country was planned by development organizations to utilize its natural beauty as a means to generate income in rural areas. Then, the advent of cultural tourism products will be examined, including tours that highlight unique aspects of Kyrgyz traditions, folklore, and crafts. Additionally, the creation of a “brand image” for the country’s alternative tourism, specifically the narratives around everything “nomad,” will be discussed. Following this, one of the main research sites of this paper, Naryn City, as well as its local tourism branch of community-based tourism, are introduced.

The Development and Structure of CBT in Kyrgyzstan

Nicola Palmer (2006) provides one of the earliest accounts of the establishment of CBT in Kyrgyzstan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country's tourism sector underwent significant changes, as it was previously highly dependent on Russian tour operators. Also, this political paradigm shift led to Western development organizations becoming active in Central Asia. Among them, the Swiss NGO Helvetas, on behalf of the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), initiated a "Community Business Support" project in rural Kyrgyzstan, aiming specifically at helping women form businesses (ibid., 51). This project recognized the need to develop structures that would enable local women to collaborate with tour operators. However, at first the tour operators active at that time were unwilling to cooperate with female entrepreneurs, especially those living in rural areas, whose ability to provide quality services they perceived as uncertain.

As a result, Helvetas helped to found the "Novinomad" tour company, which intended to fill that gap, and, following that, launched the official CBT project. In February 2000, Helvetas consultants engaged in a CBT promotion project and journeyed to Nepal to acquaint themselves with the model of tourism existing there for potential replication in Kyrgyzstan (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010, 4). By May of the same year, the inaugural CBT group had been established in Kochkor, situated in the Naryn province. Initially, fourteen CBT groups collaboratively devised a strategic plan for tourism development within their respective regions, facilitated by Helvetas consultants. These inaugural Kyrgyz CBT groups were then

united under the banner of the Kyrgyz Community-Based Tourism Association (KCBTA) in 2003, when the need for an umbrella organization was recognized.⁸

This association serves as a representative body, advocating for the collective interests of its members while also providing marketing and training services. Asylbek Rajiev, whom I was able to interview in the KCBTA head office in Bishkek, has been working in CBT from the very beginning and is now director of KCBTA. He described the organization of CBT in Kyrgyzstan as a roughly three-level structure: first come the individual service providers, who make up a local CBT group, and all the CBT groups then unite under KCBTA. It was important for Rajiev to state that the local groups are completely independent. Helvetas provided KCBTA with full funding for the first ten years. Subsequently, the community-based organization established its own tour agency to cover expenses and administrative costs. However, different development projects still contribute a fair share of their revenue: “One source comes from projects; the second source is our tour operating agency.”⁹

Each CBT group houses a diverse spectrum of local tourism service providers, encompassing “bed and breakfast providers; drivers; trekking guides; cooks; souvenir-makers; folklore show groups” (Palmer 2009, 51). Collectively, these groups promote their services to international tourists through cooperation with tour operators, who assume the roles of coordinators, packaging agents, and distributors of CBT services. The main roles of KCBTA and its sister organization, the Kyrgyz Association of Tourism Organizations (KATO),¹⁰ are to facilitate the interaction of tour operators with local CBT groups, promote tourism in general, work together

⁸ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ KATO's acronym was renamed to Kyrgyz Association of Tourism Organizations from Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators in 2023 to account for a wider field of tourism organizations, including for instance Universities.

on development projects, and conduct training for CBT groups with or without external help. The two organizations also spearheaded the introduction of the visa-free regime for foreign visitors, which has been in place since 2013.¹¹ Since then, foreign tourism in the region has started to increase, and neighboring Central Asian countries have followed this model.

KCBTA also facilitates the yearly meeting of all CBT groups, where they discuss upcoming challenges and joint strategies, such as pricing guidelines, and conduct a SWOT analysis.¹² Nowadays, there are 17 local CBT groups in the country: Jalal Abad, Arslanbob, Chong Kemin, Kara Suu, Karakol, Kazarman, Kochkor, Kyzyl Oi, Naryn, Osh/Alai, Sary Mogol, Talas, Tamchy, Toktogul, Bokonbaeva, Padysh-Ata and Kok-Art (Kara-Alma).¹³ Kyrgyzstan's only region without a CBT group is Batken. Asylbek attributed this to the poor quality of the road and the distance from the capital. However, the fact that this region used to be the site of frequent clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, as well as its less interesting geography, may also play a role (Palmer 2009, 51).

Cultural Tourism

The emergence of cultural tourism is a relatively recent trend in Kyrgyzstan, as nature-centered tours were the focus at the beginning of CBT. While cultural tourism is no easier to define than culture itself, it can be said to include more than traditionally thought of as "visiting monuments and sites [but] [...] also includes consuming the way of life in different

¹¹ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

¹² Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

¹³ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

destinations” (Mousavi et al. 2016, 74). It is thus not only limited to the past but also concerned with the “contemporary way of life and culture of people” (ibid.). According to Mirbek,¹⁴ who worked as a guide for 20 years, it is only within the last decade that festivals, master classes, and shows have become a staple tourism product in Kyrgyzstan. More concrete examples include inviting tourists to traditional Kyrgyz weddings,¹⁵ cooking traditional dishes, and handicrafts, especially yurt and shyrdak making,¹⁶ the latter being a felt carpet that has become part of the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2020).

Interestingly, during Soviet times, textile factories were also popular excursion sites for guided tourist groups, who usually traveled with their co-workers (Gorsuch 2011, 54). Back then, the focus was on factory quality and productivity; now it’s on traditional culture and communities. Today, these cultural products are being supported by development organizations through “identify[ing] families that have something unique in production but are not being integrated in the tourism sector”¹⁷ and subsequently connecting them to the market through workshops, promotion, and other types of marketing. Development organizations invest in this type of tourism to extend the short tourism season, create employment opportunities which are more resilient to climate change,¹⁸ and keep tourists in one place for longer.¹⁹

¹⁴ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

¹⁵ Sanghun Cho (CEO of Kyrgyz Friends), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

¹⁶ Asel Ismailova (Director of Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

¹⁷ Nargiza Kudaiberdieva (Helvetas project manager), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

As Erica Marat (2009) has shown, Kyrgyzstan initially lagged behind its neighboring countries in “developing a national brand to develop the tourist industry” (ibid., 1133). In the early stages of tourism marketing in post-independence Kyrgyzstan, the emphasis was placed on appraising the natural environment, particularly the country’s “celestial” mountains, with an explicit vision set for becoming Asia’s “Switzerland” (Schofield and Maccarrone-Eaglen 2011, 11). This was, in fact, a benefit for Kyrgyzstan, as “usually tourists come not just for Kyrgyzstan but for whole Central Asia. So, after visiting Uzbekistan, where the package is full of cultural experience, they would be offered visits to mountains, lakes, and stuff.”²⁰ However, as the country moved further away from the Soviet era, a new cultural identity emerged, heavily influenced by ethnicity, with these concepts swiftly finding their way into tourism products and marketing (ibid., 12).

Prime among the cultural narratives underlying this development has been the rekindling of the collective heritage of the Kyrgyz national hero Manas and the Epos by the same title, both heavily associated with Kyrgyz nomadic culture (ibid., 14). In addition to his ubiquitous presence on city squares, where his statue has supplanted numerous former “Lenins” throughout the nation, tourism products have also incorporated his historical significance. Today, the “nomad” label serves to distinguish Kyrgyzstan from its neighbor Uzbekistan, which heavily relies on narratives of the “Silk Road” as a tool to market its tourism (Fayzullaev, Cassel, and Brandt 2021).²¹ The emphasis on “nomadic culture” has not only become a means of

²⁰ Nargiza Kudaiberdieva (Helvetas project manager), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

²¹ Kazakhstan meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan’s other neighbor, while also sporting a nomadic culture, rather emphasizes on their official tourism website tours of its sprawling planned cities in what could also be seen as an attempt to bolster their image as a modern nation (Kazakhstan Travel, n.d.)

promoting tourism, but also increasingly is shaping Kyrgyz rural identity in recent years (Schofield and Maccarrone-Eaglen 2011, 19).

In 2014, this emphasis on nomadic heritage was catalyzed in the first edition of the state-sponsored “World Nomad Games” (WNG) (Maksüdünov 2020). The stated intentions were to “revive and preserve the culture, identity, and ways of life of nomadic peoples in the era of globalization” (WNG 2022). It has since been held in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 and 2018 and saw great investment by the government (ibid., 587-588). The nomad games, dubbed a striking example of the “invention of tradition” (Sheranova 2021) or “spectacular politics” (Pelkmans 2022b), align with the narrative of nomadic traditions present in alternative tourism forms like rural and community-based tourism and serve as an arena for Kyrgyzstan to bolster itself against other countries by dominating them in their traditional sport of *kok boru* (ibid., 430). Taking place in Cholpon Ata, however, this spectacular event has little to do with the type of cultural tourism that is offered in CBT locations, some examples of which can be seen below.



Figure 5: Several collected travel brochures, and cultural tourism offerings.

Naryn: Hub for Adventures

Naryn is a city located 350 km south-east of Bishkek and serves as the administrative center of the province with the same name (NURP 2023, 67-68). Despite geographically being in the south of the country, Naryn firmly belongs to the north, both culturally and logistically, as the journey north is significantly shorter and more frequent than the arduous journey to the southern cities of Jalal-Abad and Osh (Urmanbetova and Joniak-Lüthi 2022). The city is situated in a mountain valley at 2000 m above sea level on the shore of the Naryn River, one of Kyrgyzstan's most important rivers, flowing all year round. The province is Kyrgyzstan's largest territory; however, over 70% of it is occupied by mountains, with much of the terrain lying at an altitude of over 3000 meters. This makes Naryn the coldest region in Kyrgyzstan, with winter temperatures that drop below 40 degrees minus (Ilyasov et al. 2013) and also causes its tourism season to be very short, being limited to the summer months.

It is the country's least population-dense oblast, with around 300,000 inhabitants in 2023, which equates to only 6.98 (7) inhabitants per square kilometer (KNSC 2023). Naryn City today has 41,419 inhabitants (NURP 2023, Report # 01-5.1-001:71)(NURP 2023, 71). The city was founded in 1868 as a Russian fort and is located near ancient important trade routes, at a main branch of the Silk Road, leading to Kashgar in today's PRC (ibid., 69). The city's name itself has a contested etymology. In Kyrgyz, the name may allude to a unique horse soup dish; in Mongolian, it could signify "sunny," while in Chinese, it implies "narrow," a fitting depiction of the city's positioning within the steep valley (ibid.). Naryn City has two universities: Naryn State University and Kyrgyzstan's main student campus of the University of Central Asia, whose facilities I was able to use during my several field visits to Naryn. Its students, however, frequently told me about how boring life was in Naryn.

In stark contrast to Cholpon Ata, Naryn has a considerably more conservative attitude towards alcohol and partying. The ruling authorities or religious extremist groups frequently shut down bars and other venues where the youth may gather, consume alcohol, and engage in a “Western lifestyle,” according to some of the students with whom I visited the only Karaoke bar in town, aptly named “Liberty” and hidden away in a backyard. The caravanserai “Tash-Rabat” is located not far from the city (Schofield and Thompson 2002). It was built in the 15th century and is the largest stone caravanserai remaining today in Central Asia. Historically, it served as a shelter and trading post for travelers on the Silk Road, and today it is one of the region’s most famous touristic sights. Naryn City, as a destination for rural community-based tourism, mostly serves as a “transit hub,” where tourists spend a few nights before moving on to nearby jailoos or hiking treks.



Figure 6: Naryn City as seen from its overlooking mountain range.

I first came through Naryn when exploring the country on my mountain bike. Before arriving in the city, the villages of Tash Bashat and Eki Naryn were the first populated places (except for singular yurts) that I had seen since leaving the southern shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. At that time, my primary concern was finding a new inner tube for my bicycle, given that the roads I had traveled on were not particularly easy on the material. In the end, it was futile to search the bazaar for a spare part compatible with my bike because, unsurprisingly, the latest standards in mountain bike technology had not yet made it to Naryn. So, I headed to the first restaurant I could find, called the “Nomad Café,” to have some untraditional but hopefully not sickness-inducing food. Despite being a city in name and population numbers, Naryn still feels like a small village because it is extremely elongated, squeezed between the mountains on either side.

The river of the same name rushes wildly through the steep valley, fed by the glaciers of the Arabel plateau. At the time of my first arrival in Naryn, however, due to my starvation for civilization, it was apparent even to my road-weary eyes that this was comparatively a big city, with aspirations to grow even bigger. Yet, the chalk-white, five-story Soviet living blocks lining the central Lenin Street carried with them an air of a long-lost vision of modernity. Apart from that, finding cafés with English menus and Italian cuisine, as well as many travel agencies lining the side of the road, was certainly more than I had expected, showing the influence of tourism. On my later visits, coming from Bishkek, Naryn truly felt like a “mountain town” compared to the capital. Every time I returned, the city grew on me more, vowing to not only the relative peace and calm it offered but also due to my research contacts and the students of the UCA, some of whom had quickly become friends.

Rural and Community-Based Tourism in Naryn City

Before even arriving in the city, I was surprised to learn that tourism and the green economy are the two main goals of the Naryn City government.²² This agenda seems to be influenced by the Naryn Urban Resilience Project (NURP), which is active in the city specifically because of its weaker economic position compared to the rest of the country, as well as its natural hazard profile.²³ The project aims to identify areas for improvement in critical infrastructure, the green economy, and socioeconomic conditions. In later stages, the project will also improve education on sustainable tourism, specifically on the topics of water and waste management. The NURP report describes Naryn City as “a tourist city with unique tourist resources, among which there is everything that the nature can boast of. These are picturesque passes, deep gorges, wild mountain rivers, magnificent lakes and waterfalls, eternal snows and glaciers, as well as the ancient original culture [...]” (NURP 2023, 67).

Surekha Ghogale, project manager and my first research contact in Naryn, mentioned that it is crucial that the type of tourism prevalent in Naryn must change. Currently, Naryn mainly serves as a hub for tourists who stay only one night before continuing their travel to various sites around the province. This creates an ecological burden, as the relative amount of water and electricity used on short stays is significantly higher than on longer ones. According to the report above, and as many interlocutors told me, except two small museums, Naryn City itself offer much to tourists itself, which is why they mostly stay in small guesthouses and then visit the surrounding landscape. One of the main ways that tourists come to Naryn is through the CBT network active in the city.

²² Chris Gerry (Rector of the UCA), personal communication, September 2023.

²³ Surekha Ghogale (NURP project manager), interview with the author, NURP office in Naryn, September 2023.

Since 2013, Gulira Kenjekaraeva has been CBT Naryn's coordinator.²⁴ She comes from a background working in NGOs but “fell in love with this job.” Gulira is very proud to have developed a tour destination near Naryn City, which has quickly become one of Kyrgyzstan's most popular tourist attractions: Kel Suu Lake. The reason the lake was only “discovered” for tourism comparatively late lies in its remote location. It requires a special permit to enter since it borders China and is situated within a military exclusion zone. Gulira contacted the local shepherds, promised to send them tourists if they put up one or two extra yurts for visitors, and worked with the authorities to speed up the border permit process. Nowadays, most tourists that go to Kel Suu Lake acquire their border permit via the CBT office, since they advertise it on their website (CBT Naryn 2024).



Figure 7: Naryn City's CBT office.

²⁴ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

Gulira explained that despite its recent success, initially, the yurt camp was struggling: “Three years, almost two and a half years, there were no tourists. Can you imagine? She put a yurt camp there, there’s no connection, no telephone, and she was all the time waiting for tourists, but there were almost no tourists. But she kept trusting to the end; she didn’t move. Nowadays, she has already 25 yurts in the camp and recently she got some solar panels from a project. And now she is the richest woman in Kel Suu.”²⁵ The example of Jyrgal’s yurt camp, thus presents a striking recent success story in Naryn province. CBT now has around 40 to 45 permanent employees in the entire Naryn region. This does not include the large number of seasonal workers like guides, drivers, and translators, as well as the family members of the individual CBT hosts, who usually help to run the homestay in one way or another.



Figure 8: The yurt camps situated at Kel Suu Lake.

²⁵ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

In the past years, the aforementioned caravanserai Tash-Rabat, with the small yurt camp located there, has been the most well-known site reachable from Naryn City, becoming so popular in the Kyrgyz imagination that its name is being adopted for things like malls or restaurants all around the country. However, the efforts of Gulira and others to promote Kel-Suu Lake seem to have had an impact of late, as it is now the most requested destination at CBT Naryn.²⁶ Part of that reason may also be that Tash-Rabat tours are often operated by Bishkek tour providers independently, without the help of CBT Naryn, in contrast to Kel-Suu, where CBT is the best connected. Another site close to the city is the ancient fortress of Koshoy Korgon. The fort has a local museum, although many of the artifacts found on the site were carried off to be exhibited in Naryn City's museum. The removal of these items from their site of discovery, as well as the general lack of conservation efforts by the governments on these two historical locations, were points of concern for my interlocutors working at CBT Naryn.



Figure 9: Picnick at Tash-Rabat with a group of tourism students from Naryn.

²⁶ Jamal (CBT Naryn office worker). 2023. Personal communication.

While spending time at the office, Gulum, a seasonal worker and translator, explained: “You know, I have visited [Tash Rabat] four times. And together with foreigners also. And they all mentioned that you see Tash Rabat, and next to Tash Rabat, you also see vans and yurts. And when they are taking pictures, it doesn’t seem like a historical place. And vandalism exists there too, you know.”²⁷ Recently, there has been a growing interest in historical as well as natural attractions from a domestic perspective. BBC Kyrgyzstan made a very successful documentary about Kel-Suu, released on YouTube. During my stay, one of Kyrgyzstan’s most well-known TV presenters, Nazira Aitbekova (2023a; 2023b), released popular YouTube documentaries about Koshoi-Korgon and Tash Rabat. I visited both sites with a class of young tourism students from Naryn State University, with the teachers explaining that it is important for students to get acquainted with these places early on. This chapter aimed to examine the introduction and development of CBT in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on Naryn City and its surroundings, providing background for the following more in-depth discussions.

²⁷ Gulum (CBT Naryn seasonal worker), interview with the author, CBT Naryn office, October 2023.

6: Economic Impacts and Challenges

After having introduced the history and development of community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan and provided specific examples from Naryn City, I will now discuss the current issues and challenges facing the rural tourism sector in Kyrgyzstan. With this approach, I am leaning on a long tradition of studying tourism mainly through its “impacts.” Historically, this approach mostly saw “tourism as determining the fate of hosts in many ways, such as whether they will develop economically or not, whether they will feel pride or shame about themselves and their traditions, or whether they will have incentives to protect or destroy their environment” (Stronza 2001, 268). Thus, this line of argument, which mostly conceives of these impacts as negative in nature, and leaves the host seeming exploited and powerless, has its flaws, as its analysis has been “strangely devoid of local voices” (ibid.).

I will, in Chapters seven and eight, as well as my conclusion, make up for this lack of perspective and discuss tourism’s impacts on rural Kyrgyz communities through the statements of my interlocutors. This chapter, however, focuses primarily on the economic impacts of CBT and delves into its claimed premises of equal distribution of revenues and financial independence. After all, the main aim of CBT Kyrgyzstan is to alleviate rural poverty (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010). Next, I will delve into the obstacles and difficulties that hinder the growth of rural tourism in Kyrgyzstan, underscoring this with an ethnographic vignette showcasing the trials and tribulations of traveling through Kyrgyzstan. Lastly, the environmental challenges resulting from the growth of rural and community-based tourism, particularly regarding its impacts on environmentally sensitive areas, will be discussed.

Economic Impacts of CBT

Unsurprisingly, the main incentive for anyone in Kyrgyzstan to start a rural tourism business is economic in nature. As mentioned in the introduction, 33% of Kyrgyzstan's inhabitants are living below the national poverty line (Asian Development Bank 2023). Especially in rural areas, outmigration is high (Murzakulova 2020). Helvetas developed CBT and its subsequent projects primarily to alleviate rural poverty and provide additional income sources (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010, 5). In rural areas where opportunities for profitable work are low, CBT aims to attract revenue from international tourists, particularly those from Europe and the US. The idea is that over the long term, rural income opportunities in Kyrgyzstan will become available even for those not working directly in tourism. CBT claims that "the majority of revenues (usually 80-85%) are given directly to the families or proprietors visitors buy from" (CBT Kyrgyzstan, n.d.). According to my informants and interviewees, these claims hold up.

The exact rate that the hosts receive depends on where the tourists go to book their stay. Around 10%, goes to taxes, while 10-15% is given either to the local CBT group's fund or to KCBTA, depending on where the tourist booked the service (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010, 8-10). There are also membership fees, but as Asylbek told me, they are relatively negligible, amounting to only around 50 Euros per year for each local group.²⁸ Goodwin and Santili's (2009) research, which focused on interviewing CBT experts, aimed to identify the criteria used by funders, conservationists, and development workers to gauge project success and assess how projects deemed successful align with these criteria. They found little

²⁸ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

consensus among experts on what makes a CBT venture successful, with only 40% including commercial viability (ibid., 36).

The authors argue that commercial viability and economic sustainability should be the primary factors by which CBT initiatives are evaluated, while also critically reviewing their claimed community benefits, such as empowerment and ownership. In Kyrgyzstan, however, for the vast majority of guesthouse owners and other tourism workers, tourism represents only a seasonal or side income. A very short season, typically spanning from late spring to early autumn, or from June to October, restricts tourism in Kyrgyzstan (Jenish 2018, 31).²⁹ For my regional focus, the Naryn region, this season is even more restricted as it is by far the coldest oblast of Kyrgyzstan (Ilyasov et al. 2013, 21-22). The individual guesthouse owners usually shut down for the winter. For instance, Ayganash kept her guesthouse open during the first winter after opening it but found it to be non-profitable due to low visitor numbers and the cost of coal for heating.³⁰

However, the CBT coordinators and independent tour providers work throughout the year, using the off-season to plan ahead for the next year, handle accounting, and organize trainings. However, their numbers pale in comparison to those of seasonal workers. Baktygulov et al. (2010, 17) in their study of CBT Kochkor claim that CBT had created 412 direct jobs, while a 2005 survey showed that only 76 CBT workers had tourism as their main source of income. Additionally, the coordinator of the local groups is the only one who receives a regular wage,

²⁹ Only a small amount of winter tourism occurs near Bishkek and the city of Karakol, and because it still resembles “mass tourism” and primarily attracts regional and domestic travelers, it is not the subject of this study.

³⁰ Ayganash (Independent guesthouse owner), interview with the author, SPCE Naryn, November 2023.

aside from the office workers employed by larger CBTs, such as the one in Naryn.³¹ The coordinator and office workers primarily handle administrative tasks, including planning tourist itineraries, selecting guesthouses, and arranging guides, cars, and other necessary services. Having said all of this, it was crucial to Asylbek to state that CBT Kyrgyzstan manages to stay afloat financially and not be reliant on donors anymore.

Asylbek³² told me, “We are 100 percent independent, without any support already [...] But there are some phases when we need next level development, and then we need to get support [...] We don’t necessarily need a project, but the projects help us to make our network bigger, to get new members. For example, creating a new CBT location costs a lot of money.” He added that a lot of the money goes to trainings for CBT workers and that they need to rely on development projects, since, as he explained, “unfortunately there is no governmental support in Kyrgyzstan for tourism.” This continued dependency on donors is a common criticism of donor-funded tourism projects. Likewise, Goodwin and Santili (2009, 36) found that 9 out of 15 of their examined CBT projects were still dependent on or explicitly seeking donor funding. Tables d.) and e.) in the Appendix present the latest data on tourist numbers and earned revenue of CBT Kyrgyzstan.³³

Both these tables are from 2019, which was the last year when tourism operated ordinarily, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Elias, who works for a tour company in Bishkek, told me that 2023 was the first year that tourist numbers were as high or higher than pre-pandemic levels: “So, of course, the pandemic time killed tourism for a couple of years, but now it is improving

³¹ Jamal (CBT Naryn office worker), interview with the author, CBT Naryn office, October 2023.

³² Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

³³ Provided by friendly permission of Asylbek, director of KCBTA.

and compares like with the previous before the pandemic.”³⁴ The unpublished table f.) in the Appendix is based on information coming directly from the Naryn Oblast government concerning inbound tourists and tourism revenue in the region during the last years.³⁵ Remarkable is the huge rise in both the number of tourists and revenue in 2023, after the restrictions due to the pandemic were lifted. This graph shows that tourism is growing rapidly in Naryn Oblast, suggesting that it is quickly becoming a serious economic force. If these numbers are correct, and taking table e.) into consideration, we can also confidently say that CBT has only the capacity to serve a small fraction of the tourists arriving in Naryn, which leaves room for other companies and organizations as well as individual guesthouse owners to rise.

Distribution of Revenues and Phases of Development

Having explored the economic impacts of CBT in terms of numbers and acknowledged that most jobs created are seasonal, the question remains: how are the profits distributed within the community? Most central to the CBT business is the creation of homestays and guesthouses. Hosts in CBT Kyrgyzstan who already have certain amenities, such as “Western-style” indoor toilets, are more likely to gain acceptance into the network and require fewer investments to obtain the necessary hygienic certifications.³⁶ Baktygulov et al. equally

³⁴ Ilyaz Zamanov (Tour Guide of Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

³⁵ Provided by friendly permission of Omar Morales Lopez, working for the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) in Naryn.

³⁶ Asylbek Rajiev (CEO of KCBTA). 2023. Personal communication.

recognize this problem but see it as necessary to be able to fulfill CBT's "quality standards" (ibid.).

Additionally, guesthouses and yurt camps located at "strategic points" close to existing sights or mountain trails, also have an advantage in becoming members.³⁷ Therefore, it is usually not the "poorest" community members who have a chance to join the CBT network, let alone profit from it. Returning to the example of the yurt camp at Kel Suu Lake, owned by Jyrgal: after an initially slow start, it now boasts 25 yurts.³⁸ While this creates many other jobs alongside, it shows how explosive growth in some areas can be, while in other areas without such vicinity to natural assets, growth might be slow or even stagnant. Many interviewees described how they believe that more tourists in the region benefit everyone in the community, through a sort of "trickle-down effect," leading to increased revenues for various businesses like shops or restaurants.³⁹

However, there were also critical voices. Surekha told me, "If you don't have any facilities, there's no spending, so the city is really not benefiting."⁴⁰ Crucially, there is no empirical data verifying that the introduction of tourism into an area will lead to poverty alleviation on an individual level through the "trickling down" of revenues (Holden, Sonne, and Novelli 2011). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the study by Baktygulov et al. (2010, 17), claimed a myriad of "indirect economic benefits from tourism related services [...] includ[ing] spending on food,

³⁷ Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

³⁸ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

³⁹ Jamal (CBT Naryn office worker), interview with the author, CBT Naryn office, October 2023.

⁴⁰ Surekha Ghogale (NURP project manager), interview with the author, NURP office in Naryn, September 2023.

supplies, and other necessities for home stays and yurt operations,” however, without citing any specific figures.

Contradicting these statements, it has been observed that tourism often leads to increased inequality (Schilcher 2007, 59-60). However, in some cases, CBT actively contributes to charity for vulnerable people in the form of material support (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010, 17). Additionally, offering trainings for all members is a sign that they try to at least indirectly foster equality of opportunity.⁴¹ There are two reasons I will not speculate further about the trickle-down effect here. First, I don’t have enough data or the qualifications to analyze it, and even if I had, the trickle-down effect is almost impossible to prove. Second, local CBT groups retain significant sovereignty, potentially leading to vastly different outcomes in terms of income and inequality, which can be understood as distinct “phases” of development. Zapata et al. propose a “life-cycle” model for CBT, beginning with an “exploration” phase for novel tourism and product development (ibid., 734).

The next step is the “engagement” phase, which depends on securing capital. If successful, this leads to intensive training and a gradual increase in tourist numbers. The third phase varies significantly for each CBT project; many remain at moderate growth, with revenue often insufficient to cover initial costs, or even stagnate, leading to eventual frustration and dissolution. Conversely, some CBTs experience rapid growth during the third phase, which can lead to significant environmental, infrastructural, or managerial challenges. In line with table f.), some portions of Naryn’s CBT can be seen as experiencing rapid growth. Since the Naryn Region is vast and not every yurt camp, like Jyrgal’s, has equally profited from Kel Suu Lake

⁴¹ Education and trainings will be examined more thoroughly in Chapter 8.

becoming the “hottest” new tourist attraction,⁴² I cannot make statements for the whole region. Since the success of homestays largely depends on their location near natural sights, the “life-cycle” model of Zapata et al. can only be applied to individual sites. In summary, whether CBT in Kyrgyzstan, or even just in the Naryn Region, fulfills its economic promises is hard to assess due to various factors, including locality, seasonality, and the difficulty of measuring indirect economic effects.

Growth Potential of Rural Tourism

After demonstrating that local CBT enterprises experience varying degrees of growth, I want to take a step back and examine the factors hindering the overall growth of rural tourism. Although this approach may seem counterintuitive and un-anthropological, my intention is to comprehend the limitations of CBT and rural tourism, ultimately leading to a more thorough understanding of the concept. Nazgul Jenish, having published one of the most comprehensive studies on tourism in Kyrgyzstan (not limited to small-scale rural tourism and CBT), finds the following main challenges for the sector: “Difficulty of access and poor infrastructure [1]; Weak marketing and insufficient use of digital technologies [2]; Poor quality of services and inadequate skills of providers [3]; Short seasonality of tourist products [4]; Administrative barriers to start and to run a tourism business [5]; Inequitable distribution of tourism receipts and environmental pollution [6]” (Jenish 2018, 4, numbering points added by the author).

⁴² Jamal (CBT Naryn office worker), interview with the author, CBT Naryn office, October 2023.

While I have already addressed challenges 4, 5, and partly 6, this section will elaborate on the remaining challenges for the further growth of rural tourism outlined by Jenish. Starting from the front, the poor infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan, both physical and digital, is one of the most cited hindrances to tourism development (ibid., 28-29). While access to information for tourists has improved in recent years, many hurdles remain for travelers navigating the country independently instead of relying on a guide. For instance, navigating official websites can be confusing due to multiple sites with similar names, making it difficult to determine the correct one.⁴³ This is due to limited or outdated information in online resources and travel guides, as well as the general lack or poor state of roads and public transport infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan. The following vignette will give an insight into the difficulties of getting around the country.

Many of my interviewees, as well as a consensus in the literature, made it clear that a joint strategy is necessary for rural tourism and CBT to reach their full potential (Jamal and Dredge 2014, 20ff.). Initially, I planned to include government agencies in my study. However, they were unavailable for interviews, and my interlocutors viewed the government's efforts to stimulate tourism as ambiguous, to say the least. For instance, Samuel, who has observed changes in Kyrgyz tourism since 2000, said the following about government support for tourism: "Well, they are just killing tourism in Kyrgyzstan. And all they are promoting is this glamping."⁴⁴ Others made similar statements, suggesting that the government lacks a clear understanding of the type of tourism that rural residents require or desire. Borchardt also

⁴³ For instance, for the countrywide CBT network, there are two websites, titled <https://cbtkyrgyzstan.com/> and <https://cbtkyrgyzstan.kg/en/>

⁴⁴ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

argued that the government still seems “stuck” in Soviet-style resort tourism or mass events such as the World Nomad Games (Borchardt 2018, 78–80).

While Gulira was aware that the government is starting to become invested in tourism, the extent was unclear to her. She said, “I don’t know how much our government is using their own potential; But I know they are doing something. I haven’t seen their special program, but I think at least they are doing something.”⁴⁵ This “unknowingness” is not for lack of trying, as Gulira doesn’t shy away from any opportunity to network or cooperate with others. The difficulty of securing loans is significant acute factor that is hindering the growth of rural tourism. At the local banks, loans start at a 28 percent interest rate per year, which is unreachable for most people.⁴⁶ Hence, these loans are often provided by tour operators, even outside of the CBT network, who seek to develop potential homestays with favorable positions and reliable service providers.

The reliability of service providers, often doubted by tour operators, is another hindrance to growth. Many of my interlocutors from both development and tourism organizations emphasized the importance of obtaining standardizations and certificates. Currently, there is a significant push to implement these certificates, particularly in the area of sustainability. While Jenish (2018, 4) cites insufficient marketing as a factor hindering growth, Samuel had the opposite opinion, particularly regarding government and donor spending. In fact, he perceived excessive marketing as harmful. While marketing may attract new tourists, if the underlying infrastructure does not support the increase in numbers, negative consequences

⁴⁵ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

⁴⁶ Denis Krasnozhonov (Senior advisor at GIZ), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

will follow: “And when you have basic problems with education, with water, with infrastructure, they say ‘oh, well, we want to develop tourism, but we don’t want to speak about basic problems.’ So, you have to 10 million from this government to attract tourists in Karakol. In Karakol there is, 30 percent to little electricity.”⁴⁷ This topic, both concerning sustainability and certificates, will be picked up again in Chapter 9.

A bumpy road

After several days of travel on Uzbek sleeper trains and overland buses, the sprawling and overstimulating bazaar of Jalal-Abad, with its main bus terminal and several large parking lots nearby, appeared to us like a dazzling maze. Despite consulting our travel guide and asking many locals, we received misleading information, and it took us hours to find the parking lot where cars to Kazarman usually depart. When we finally found it, we discovered this parking lot was tucked away in a remote corner of the city and housed only a handful of cars, unlike the other lots where cars were parked side by side. The perilous Kaldama Pass appeared to see minimal traffic these days. While there was a newer and better road in existence, the highway M-41 connecting Osh and Bishkek, this old and neglected Soviet road was still hours faster and more direct. Our “Lonely Planet” guide advised contacting the local CBT office to organize a ride to Kazarman, which we had tried. Regrettably, the travel guide’s address was out-of-date, and the locals’ directions didn’t lead us anywhere. So, after numerous unanswered calls, we decided to organize the trip ourselves. However, the lone driver in our parking lot informed us that the pass had been snowed over, advising us to return the following day.

⁴⁷ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.



Figure 10: Treacherous journey over the Kaldama Pass.

Arriving punctually at 9 a.m. the next morning, we waited another three hours for other passengers to arrive, all they fed us honey melons and curiously probed us about our relationship status. We finally made it onto the road, only for it to quickly turn into a bumpy and washed-out gravel track leading up the mountain. Climbing higher and higher, massive vultures were soaring above us and we almost got stuck in the remnants of the snow that had blocked the pass just one day prior. But in the end, we made it to Kazarman, the car only breaking down twice on the way. Cars breaking down in the middle of nowhere is a kind of daily occurrence in Kyrgyzstan, and while it took our driver some trial and error both times, in the end, he got his 30-year-old Audi 100 going again. However, Kazarman was not our only goal for the day. I needed to be in Naryn the next morning, about 150 kilometers to the east, for scheduled interviews.

And since the snow blockage on the pass had already cost us a day, we immediately wanted to press on. Instead, we quickly discovered that no one was going our way. When we insisted on going in that direction, we encountered the Kyrgyz laid-back attitude toward travel, as we were

told that maybe we could try again tomorrow. Confused, we consulted our map again. There it was: a clear main road leading east to Naryn, our destination. However, even after showing it to people, everyone told us that no one would take us there or use this road themselves. When we finally met someone speaking English, he offered us to drive half-way that distance for the astronomic price of 100 dollars, since for him it would mean having to turn back to Kazarman in the same night, and people in Kyrgyzstan are (with rights) scared to drive at night. Dismayed, we turned around to turn onto another newly built road, leaving the city in a northern direction through a winding canyon.

Surprisingly, this road, developed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, was so new that it had not yet appeared on any of our maps. This road would eventually lead us to Naryn, albeit with a lengthy detour via Kochkor. After waving at passing cars, two young men picked us up without asking for any money. They brought us to Chaek, where the new road was completely devoid of traffic. From there, we caught another taxi to Kochkor, where we then hitched our last ride while it was already dark, the car again struggling to make it over the freezing Dolon Pass to Naryn. While we considered ourselves seasoned travelers, we encountered many trials organizing our transport in Kyrgyzstan. Not only was the information on the internet and maps often outdated and misleading, but the poor state of the roads and the resulting lack of traffic made it a real challenge.

Environmental Challenges

Tourists staying at rural or community-based tourism guesthouses in Kyrgyzstan primarily engage in activities closely related to nature. As others (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010; Zapata et al. 2011) have pointed out, CBT's earnings are mostly divided into nights spent at a

homestay and participation in tours. These tours necessitate that the environment is unpolluted and not overrun. As Lane writes, rural tourism's ideological roots lie in the romantic conception of valuing "contact with nature," even within more "ordinary" landscapes (Lane 2009, 354). Rural tourism's most widely spread subtype, ecotourism, is unique in that it not only aims to get the tourist into contact with nature, but it also "promotes the concept of sustainable rural tourism" (ibid., 356). CBT Kyrgyzstan explicitly vows to practice environmentally conscious ecotourism and promote nature conservation through policies and practices such as proper water and sewage disposal, waste separation, avoidance of single-use plastics and paper, supporting cleanup efforts, lobbying, and energy-efficient power use (CBT Kyrgyzstan, n.d.).

While CBT activities are low-impact on natural resources, the infrastructural requirements and restrictions to enable these activities are not to be underestimated. Continuing with the example of Jyrgal's yurt camp at Kel Suu Lake, its location in a remote mountain valley at 3,500 meters of altitude, which is its main "selling point," carries with it significant challenges. Driving from Naryn to Kel Suu takes around 5 hours, is only suitable for 4x4 or offroad vehicles, and is restricted from June to September. The fact that the actual driving distance is only around 160 kilometers demonstrates the extremely poor condition of the road. This takes its toll on the vehicles and makes it a rather expensive endeavor, costing \$150 for a round-trip. When I rode my bicycle up to Kel Suu, I was amazed by the dozens of vehicles coming my way after returning from this arduous trek. Once arriving at the yurt camp, the struggles against the harsh environment are not over. Even in summer, the freezing temperatures necessitate heating the yurts overnight. A yurt owner once informed me that tourists find the traditional yak and cow dung unpleasant, which is why they use coal instead.

While tourists, like myself, see burning fossil fuels to facilitate the stay at Kel Suu as contradictory to the ecotourism concept, there is little that can be done without better infrastructure. Another issue is the management of waste, which is buried or burned in Kel Suu. Thus, the problem largely remains hidden from the tourists' eyes. Many travelers I spoke with about the discrepancy between the promotion and practice of ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan had similar reactions to the following response to my survey: "I think tourism should be eco in general (otherwise we would threaten the main touristic product: nature). I think the term 'eco' is mainly for marketing."⁴⁸ The CBT workers in Naryn, Gulira, and Jamal themselves were concerned about this topic, and with the numbers of tourists to Naryn drastically increasing,⁴⁹ they may be right to worry. They were angry with official documents produced for tourists, telling them to bury their trash instead of bring it back down to the valley, where it would be collected in a waste dump.⁵⁰

While the Naryn Region has the lowest vulnerability to crop failure due to climate change in Kyrgyzstan, it also has the lowest adaptive capacity, both due to its extremely mountainous terrain (Ilyasov et al. 2013, 9). According to the most recent risk assessment data, the city faces increasing natural hazards due to soil degradation, flooding, and earthquakes (NURP 2023). Gulira, in particular, saw a direct connection between her environmental concerns about CBT and education: "This is our problem nowadays: to teach local people. We have to teach them, yes, earning money is good, but also, they have to learn how to deal with trash, water, many

⁴⁸ See table h.) in the Appendix.

⁴⁹ See table f.) in the Appendix.

⁵⁰ Jamal (CBT Naryn office worker), interview with the author, CBT Naryn office, October 2023.

things. Let's say we need some additional training and education to teach local people.”⁵¹

Knowing how to operate tourism in an environmentally sustainable way requires a lot of specialized knowledge that is simply not as readily available in Kyrgyzstan.

I will revisit the topic of sustainability and education again in Chapter 8, when discussing the involvement of development projects. The challenges presented by climate change and the need to switch to sustainable energy are particularly difficult for remote regions like Naryn, making ecotourism indeed seem more like a different word for nature tourism, losing its meaning regarding sustainability in the process. In conclusion, this chapter explored the economic impacts of CBT Kyrgyzstan and the distribution of its revenues among its members. It has been shown that while the organization as such is profitable and growing, as shown in tables d.), e.) and f.), some members may profit more than others. Also, one big factor limiting the economic impact of CBT is that for most workers, the income opportunities remain seasonal. Additionally, this chapter discussed the factors hindering the growth of CBT and the environmental challenges resulting from said growth, to show the limitations of CBT Kyrgyzstan.

⁵¹ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

7: Effects on Social Structures and the Emergence of Independent

Guesthouses

While outlining the economic impacts and challenges of CBT is important, this thesis mainly focuses on extra-economic aspects. Indeed, Shokirov et al. (2014, 37) found that 87% of tourism research in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan primarily focuses on economic objectives, highlighting the relevance of the approach employed here. As explained in the last chapter, Goodwin and Santili (2009) argued that economic viability should be the main criterion for gauging the success of CBT ventures. However, I contend that while economic viability is crucial for the independent operation of CBT, it should not be the sole determinant of the success or failure of CBT projects. Therefore, in this chapter, I will delve into the social effects of CBT Kyrgyzstan and scrutinize the relation between economic viability and achieving a lasting impact on the local community.

To inform this discussion, the first section of this chapter provides background on traditional notions of identity and community in Kyrgyzstan. Then, I will examine the fundamental social premises of CBT—the empowerment of the local community—and provide examples where it fails to achieve this. I argue that another long-term effect of CBT’s introduction is the recent trend of independent guesthouses emerging, which I classify as “rural tourism” in a general way. In this section, I explore the opportunities for independent tourism entrepreneurs and study the effects of this upsurge in competition on the communities of local tourism workers, providing a vignette concerning the potential conflicts caused by this particular development. Finally, I will discuss the aspect of female empowerment, followed by another ethnographic vignette presenting the case of Begayim.

Identity and Community in Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz social fabric is historically woven together by the intricate threads of tribes (*uruus*) and clans (*uruks*), which formed the foundational units of their traditional community structure (Gullette 2010, 4). Leadership within an uruu was attained through various means, including violence, birthright, or popular vote (ibid., 80pp.). However, the uruu was in many ways a fluid category, becoming active for life-cycle rituals, when invoking kinship obligations, or fostering relations with strangers. It is noteworthy that the Kyrgyz conception of identity as an “ethnic group” is a consequence of the colonial influence of Soviet Russia, which first delineated those ethnic groups in the first place, believing that they would later wither away in favor of a common “Soviet identity” (ibid., 166). Soviet policies aimed at diluting or eradicating kinship affiliations and imposing a new national identity on the Kyrgyz proved futile, even though kinship affiliations were perceived as “backwards” and dangerous to communist authority (Jacquesson 2012).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, kin-based relationships resurged. This resurgence was fueled by both nation-building endeavors and the newfound freedom to express suppressed identities (Light 2018). In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, the renaissance of local, traditional, and cultural values has produced accusations of “tribalism” against the then-president Askar Akaev and opened the discussions on political critiques and affirmations of loyalty based on belonging to an uruu (Roth 2023, 20). Nathan Light examined the identity-creating power of genealogies and lineages in a Kyrgyz village, finding that while they are used to discuss histories, “patrilineages play a much less important role than in the past, and at the national level they are best seen as a heritage category” (Light 2018, 24).

Instead, it may be argued that while these categories hold some importance in structuring local rituals and identities, the more powerful identity-shaping forces today are the “Western” categories of ethnicity and nationality (Roth 2023, 20). Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has made explicit its ethno-nationalism centered around the Manas Epos (Laruelle 2021). In recent years, the narrative around Kyrgyz nationhood has become increasingly Kyrgyz-speaking, as opposed to the prior dominance of the Russian language in official circles, and influenced by the rising importance of “neo-fundamentalist piety movements such as Tablighi Jamaat” (ibid., 94). However, the notions of national identity are not as important for this thesis as the more local conceptions of community.

One important aspect is that economic pressures in many regions of Kyrgyzstan lead “people to rely more on immediate family and friends for support rather than genealogical networks that appear more abstract” (Roth 2023, 20). Igor Rubinov observes that since the surge in labor migration in the 2000s, remittances sent back home have primarily been used for basic household needs rather than contributing to any macroeconomic surplus (Rubinov 2014, 185). This supports findings that remittances do not traditionally aid in economic development (OECD 2005). Rubinov (2014, 186) further notes that recipients often use these remittances for celebrations and gifts. These feasts and festivities, or *toi*, serve as community-building events, transforming remittances into large communal gatherings. The *toi* rituals, described by Schoeberlein-Engel (1994) as affirming family-community relationships, have regained importance with the increase in remittances over the past decade.

Rubinov terms this the “*toi* economy,” where households and families forge alliances, minimizing household risks through strong interpersonal networks, in contrast to individual value maximization (ibid., 191). Additionally, the *toi* serves as a discursive space within this

“moral economy,” addressing issues of obligations, proper actions based on status, and the avoidance of shame (ibid., 207). At first glance, the toi feasts resemble the Kwakiutl’s potlatch ceremonies, with their communal celebrations and animal gifting. David Graeber posits that the potlatch rituals may serve as a means of “combat” through gift-giving (Graeber 2001, 219). However, unlike the potlatch, the toi is not about establishing oneself as a leader by giving the most. Instead, it is the invited guests who bring gifts (Rubinov 2014, 188; Light 2015, 188). While the remittance-fueled initial hosting can become grandiose, its purpose lies in creating strong communities to minimize household risks, not in individual utility-maximization or a demonstration of power (Rubinov 2014, 189).

Another striking example comes from Setsuko Yoshida, who studied the privatization of farming enterprises in the 1990s (Yoshida 2005). She concludes that while Soviet collectivization ignored the uruks, patrilinear descent groups, in establishing kolkhozes, when these farms were privatized, the majority of villagers established new enterprises with their patrilinear kin (ibid., 142). However, during the economic hardship that followed, maintaining practices of mutual aid and spending rituals became increasingly difficult, leading some kinship networks to become more constrained and focus on individual survival with their immediate family. I bring up these studies because the following discussion focuses on the intersection of creating strong communities that also have to be profitable enterprises—similar to the case here. Additionally, it demonstrates that even in the absence of CBT, Kyrgyzstan harbors various notions of *community*.

Notes on Empowerment and Participation

From the beginning, I set out with a critical set of questions, charged with finding out whether CBT works as advertised and if its initial premises still hold true. After all, some of its claimed social benefits seemed almost “too good to be true.” Throughout my research, numerous of my interviewees described to me how CBT has changed from its outset. This was mostly associated with things getting worse and not limited to people from outside of the organization. Gulira, coordinator of CBT Naryn, shared her doubts with me, saying, “I tell you the truth. CBT is now working more like a personal business.”⁵² Following that, she emphasized that the great importance that CBT again “works for the community.” I asked her why she thinks this community aspect has weakened since CBT’s inception: “Because a lot of new people came in, they don’t know what community-based tourism is. They came because of money.”⁵³ According to her, this shift is due to a new generation of workers and homestays joining CBT, who were not as well taught in the underlining principles of the organization or merely heard that there was a lot of profit to be made.

Interestingly, the attitude of tourists also reflected this “loss” of the founding community values: “I remember a long time ago, there were a lot of tourists coming to CBT who told us, ‘Hey, we are coming to you because we know our money goes to the community’—But something like that I didn’t hear for a long time anymore.”⁵⁴ The study by Baktygulov et al. places large responsibilities and power within the “General Assembly” (GA) of the local CBT, comprised of all its members and taking place once per month (Baktygulov, Raeva, and

⁵² Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Kraemer 2010, 7). Also, Asylbek reiterated to me that “the main difference [of CBT to conventional tourism] is that many decisions are taken by locals.”⁵⁵ And while the authors also state that the coordinator is elected by the GA and then “responsible for all operational issues” (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010, 7), in CBT Naryn and Kochkor today, the role of the assembly seems diminished, only taking place once per year instead of monthly. Thus, it is not surprising that the coordinator makes most decisions in local CBT groups, while members only evaluate these decisions at the annual meeting, where they can shape the agenda for the following year.

Bek, who has been the coordinator of CBT Kochkor since 2023, didn’t explicitly plan to take on this role, but other members suggested it during this yearly meeting.⁵⁶ Also, not all members are eligible to vote, but only after they have been with the organization for some years are they granted this right. As Jyrgal’s example illustrates, the location of the individual homestay or yurt camp is critical to its profitability. While this seems to result from either tourist preferences or unequal marketing, in theory, an increase in total tourist numbers should still benefit all members of the CBT network because they “refer” tourists to the next CBT location or homestay if they haven’t booked a fully planned tour. However, Jekatarina Rudolph, working on a GIZ project that cooperates with CBTs in the Jalal-Abad region, reported the following: “So we had one example in the group, where the coordinator only invites people to his or his relatives’ places.”⁵⁷ This led the nearby guesthouses to abstain from joining the network and operate independently.

⁵⁵ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

⁵⁶ Bek (Coordinator of CBT Kochkor), interview with the author, CBT Kochkor office, November 2023.

⁵⁷ Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

Similarly, Samuel, founder of one of Kyrgyzstan's largest rural tourism agencies, told me: "The success of CBT is in the hands of the coordinator [...] But some of them, they have become like family businesses."⁵⁸ He pointed out that this approach misses the essence of CBT, as in the case he cited, the group isolates itself from the outside world and declines to welcome new members. In fact, Mirbek told me that he had left CBT and became an independent guide partly due to disagreements with the coordinator of CBT Kochkor at that time, who, according to him, did not want anyone else to influence the group's direction.⁵⁹ Another coordinator, taking over the same position at a later point, only worked from a Bishkek office and, according to Mirbek, used the website and his influence in the capital mainly for his own personal gain. According to the picture presented by my interlocutors, it appears that the coordinators both possess more power than intended within the CBT concept, and in certain instances, they misuse this power for their own personal gain.

As Kirsty Blackstock argues in her influential critique of CBT, "local control does not automatically lead to participatory decisionmaking" (Blackstock 2005, 42). She points out that for CBT to function as intended, it would require that the local population, to a large part, be aware of the power structures present within their respective communities. Blackstock's case study of Port Douglas reveals that the tourism industry primarily uses the CBT framework to legitimize its existence. However, this legitimacy is largely based on empty rhetoric, as it only benefits a small and powerful elite (ibid., 45). Another study by Dolezal and Novelli (2022) on community-based tourism in Bali found that local elites remained in charge of the tourism business, even after CBT's establishment. Mayaka et al. (2019), studying many branches of

⁵⁸ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

⁵⁹ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

Kenyan CBT's, found some groups achieving high community involvement, while in others, certain few individuals were able to amass power (ibid., 185). While none of these criticisms can be leveled as forcefully against CBT Kyrgyzstan, there are significant overlaps.

Similarly to the life-cycle model of CBT's discussed above (Zapata et al. 2011), this shows that the success of CBT in reaching its social aspirations is again highly dependent on individual members. Referring back to Scheyvens' (1999) definition of empowerment, it appears that while a local CBT group may achieve economic empowerment, social and political empowerment—that is, the creation of a cohesive community capable of participating in decision-making—seems to occur less frequently. The case of some CBT's becoming “family businesses” is somewhat reminiscent of the study of Yoshida (2005) presented in the last section. The fact that some coordinators only work together with their family may be an effect of the economic hardship, strengthening family bonds at the cost of the wider community.

In response to my question about why more community members don't have the power to influence group decision-making, Mirbek, a former guide for CBT, said, “This community, actually, it should be like this.”⁶⁰ He then added that, to a large extent, the community used to be tighter before, as tourism services were almost exclusively booked through CBT's own network. Nowadays, this situation has changed, leading CBT members to search for opportunities to receive tourists from other tour providers on their own. Thus, the number of tourists one receives depends not only on the suitability of a CBT guesthouse's location but also on the entrepreneurial vigor of individual host.

⁶⁰ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

The Opening of the Tourism Market

Between 2011 and 2016, there was a 40% surge in the number of registered tourism enterprises in Kyrgyzstan (Jenish 2018, 13). Notably, the growth in micro- and small-scale businesses is the most significant. The success of CBT, the most well-established tourism network in Naryn City and throughout Kyrgyzstan, is at least partially responsible for this rise in small rural tourism enterprises. The community-based organization, its cooperators, and international donors laid the groundwork, leading to the establishment of numerous independent tourism businesses.⁶¹ The role of CBT in “opening up” the market was very well summarized by Asylbek: “You see, we changed the minds of the people. I think the historical role of the CBT program was that we established a business model. When we started, we were like a monopoly in rural tourism. Now we are no monopoly anymore.”⁶²

He went on to discuss the influx of new rural tourism actors: “There are a lot of independent providers who are not necessarily members of CBT, and don’t need to be. Why? Conditions have changed. 20 years ago, it was very difficult to get connected to the market. You needed to belong to an organization like CBT, and there was no internet, so no connection. Nowadays, you have everything.” Mirbek discussed the same dynamic but more directly emphasized CBT’s diminishing position due to digital technologies: “I would say CBT is losing its power because of the internet. [...] Now there is the internet, and there are, for example, Booking.com. and Airbnb. Before, tourists didn’t have the option of booking directly from the guest house or

⁶¹ And, as will be discussed in Chapter 9, there have been many development projects aiming at diversifying the jobs available to rural populations through tourism, that have not directly cooperated with the existing CBT network and have thus led to more actors in the rural tourism sphere.

⁶² Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

somewhere else—they booked through CBT—now everything functions directly [...].”⁶³ While already an established standard in Europe, the USA, and many touristic regions around the world, this style of online booking remains relatively limited and novel in Kyrgyzstan, with a few localized exceptions, such as Bishkek and the winter sports capital of Karakol.⁶⁴

In the tourism literature, this digital “peer-to-peer” market has become known as part of the private “sharing economy” (Zervas, Proserpio, and Byers 2017; Quattrone et al. 2016). There is currently limited or no research on the extent to which this influx of “Silicon Valley” in the form of digital booking platforms has disrupted the Central Asian tourism market. Both with Booking.com and Airbnb, members pay around 15-20% in fees.⁶⁵ The remaining 80% is roughly equivalent to what CBT members usually receive, as outlined in the last chapter. However, although independent guesthouses may receive a similar share of revenue as CBT members, the fees they pay to global corporations do not reinvest in the local organization or reimburse the local coordinators. Thus, the fees are “lost” to them compared to the CBT network, where they are essentially funding their own network of guesthouses and tour operators, which eventually will not only send them more tourists, but also enable them to have a say in the future of the group, albeit only once per year in most cases.

The locals, however, have found their own ways of dealing with the extractive booking platforms. When tourists arrive at the guesthouse, the host may sometimes ask them to cancel their booking on the website. Due to the cash payment method, Booking.com lacks the ability

⁶³ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, in Cholpon-Ata, almost no guesthouses appeared on „Western“ booking platforms like Google or Booking.com. Instead, I had to download specific apps in Russian, used by tourists from CIS countries, who, as explained in Chapter 4, are the main visitors to the resort town.

⁶⁵ Ilimkazy (Independent guesthouse owner), interview with the author, Naryn guesthouse, November 2023.

to verify the visitors' actual stay at the guesthouse. That way, the hosts get to keep all of the money without having to pay the 20% fee. The only drawback is that hosts cannot leave a positive review on the website, and potential double bookings might occur. In my personal experience, I encountered uncertainty when booking a guesthouse through Booking.com in Kyrgyzstan. Incidentally, I used the website to book a guesthouse four times during my travels—usually when there was no CBT guesthouse available or I wasn't able to contact them—and on two of those occasions, the cash payment I had to make upon arrival exceeded the website's indicated price. By talking to other tourists and one of my hosts, I discovered that this isn't because the hosts are having difficulty navigating the website and raising the price; rather, it's a clever ploy to reduce Booking.com's fees. Of course, the tourists who have to pay more than the listed price online might be left feeling scammed.

When I asked some of my interviewees, who were working in CBT, if they see people leaving their organization as critical or perceive them as competition, I got answers that seemed to portray the contrary. Bek clarified that CBT members are free to leave the organization at any time and harbor no resentment, stating, "It's free; everyone is free. So, it's their job. It's their business."⁶⁶ And in the case of members leaving CBT to become independent, Chyngyz restated that CBT is there to help them even after they leave the organization.⁶⁷ Similarly, Asylbek held a very positive view about competition: "For the moment, I think we need competition. Because without competition, the quality will not increase. For the moment, the market is growing, and [...] the bad service providers will not survive anyway."⁶⁸ What stood

⁶⁶ Bek (Coordinator of CBT Kochkor), interview with the author, CBT Kochkor office, November 2023.

⁶⁷ Chyngyz (Guide at CBT Kochkor), interview with the author, CBT Kochkor office, November 2023.

⁶⁸ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

out to me from these quotes was a strong belief in entrepreneurial values and the free market, which will be analyzed further in the concluding chapter.

Tour operators are the other main way that both CBT and independent guesthouses get their visitors. While tour operators do charge a fee, collaborating with them can provide certain benefits for the hosts, as Denis clarified: “Of course they can use, and they do [use] platforms like Booking.com and others. But these are only individual tourists. But I know some yurt camps that only work with tour operators because, when they have groups coming, it’s easier for them. And it’s also the way of management; not all guest houses can communicate well.”⁶⁹ However, the certifications and standards of guesthouses mentioned earlier are now required by many tour operators. Those standards, in turn, might not be feasible to obtain for everyone, if the guesthouses choose to be completely on their own and not interact with the existing organizations at all. Lastly, it’s important to note that locals often lack the necessary knowledge and resources to operate even a basic yurt homestay independently (Jenish 2018, 4).

This includes the ability to manage their own marketing and access to sufficient electricity and internet. Samuel told me that quite simply, for most people living and working on a *jailoo* during the summer, it is not possible to have access to the internet often enough in order to make a profit with Booking.com.⁷⁰ Thus, digital booking technologies primarily impact urban areas like Naryn City, where electricity and internet are readily available. What can be said following these interviews, and confirmed by a recent market assessment by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (ERBD) is that while many Central Asian people have

⁶⁹ Denis Krasnozhonov (Senior advisor at GIZ), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

⁷⁰ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

strong entrepreneurial beliefs and attitudes, few have equal economic prospects (Usov 2023). According to this assessment, only about 10% of young people have the skills and expertise as well as access to trainings needed to pursue any entrepreneurial activity. Thus, opening a guesthouse independent of the CBT network is, as of now, still reserved for a few select individuals. In the following vignette, I will highlight the experiences of two independent guesthouse owners in Naryn City in more depth and show how the recent emergence of independent guesthouses might create conflicts after all.

The Exclusivity of Community

I entered the guesthouse at 6 p.m., when it was already dark outside. With no street lights and uneven ground, I stumbled through the moonlight until I reached the metal door to its courtyard. Ilimkazy warmly welcomed me and briefly introduced me to his wife and daughters, who were making what looked like Borsok (small pieces of fried yeast bread, titled “welcome bread”—a sign of hospitality) in their kitchen. We, however, went into the back room, which, now that the season was over, was not hosting bunk beds for travelers anymore, instead sporting the giant, 6-meter-long dining table that somehow was squeezed into every rural Kyrgyz home. The end of the tourist season, which is also the end of the farming season, brings about the time when most Kyrgyz celebrations of weddings, childbirth, and other festivities happen. One specific example is the Khitan, a Muslim practice of circumcising young males to initiate them into the Muslim religious community (ummah).

The room was, as is typical, lavishly decorated with white and gold murals on the walls and ceiling, drowning everything else out and numbing my senses with a sacral intensity. Previously,

a curtain had been drawn up to act as a barrier between the bunk beds and the other rooms, creating a sort of makeshift hallway, which is why I hadn't noticed the room before. The entire left-hand wall was occupied by a tall, white, glass-paneled wardrobe holding various trinkets. Among them, many certificates were proudly displayed. Pompous, or even a waste of space, this room may seem to Western visitors, while for the Kyrgyz people, it holds central importance in their culture. The feasts and festivities that take place in autumn are part of the greater ritual of "toi," as described earlier (see Rubinov 2014). This house, like most in the neighborhood, would host a wide array of kin, friends, and neighbors at least once a year to share the spoils of summer.

My second time in Naryn was in late September, when I stayed in Ilimkazy's guesthouse for a few days with my travel partner while attending the Nomad 2023 film festival in the city and establishing my first research contacts. At the time, however, I was still mainly focusing on community-based tourism and development, so I hadn't considered talking to someone from the non-CBT guesthouse I was staying in—especially since I didn't see Ilimkazy then, and he was the only English speaker in the household. Now that I had returned for the fourth time to the city, I sat down opposite him and asked if I could record our talk. To my surprise, he acted like this was nothing special for him, as he had been interviewed a few years ago on the topic of bride kidnapping by some other researchers. As his two daughters brought us chai, our topic shifted back to why I'd come here. Ilimkazy and his wife had founded their guesthouse in 2019, right at the start of the pandemic.

I received his contact information through the SPCE, which had conducted trainings on tourism that they had participated in. He told me that it was entirely new terrain for them, even saying that COVID helped them by freeing up some of their time for attending trainings. Then his tone

grew colder, and I saw a hint of frustration in his eyes. He confessed to me, “You know, we went to CBT, and they didn’t, they didn’t help us.” Furthermore, he claimed that the tourists’ assumptions about their money helping the community when booking CBT were nothing but a false hope. When he and his wife had gone to CBT asking for support, they had just issued excuses: “They don’t want to have more rivals, I think.” Others had also been turned away by CBT Naryn. Earlier that day, I interviewed Ayganash, who had founded her homestay two years ago and even built an entirely new guesthouse.

We were seated in the SPCE building, in a sunlit yet unheated classroom. Ayganash also reported on the declining reputation of CBT and that she believed they were sending their tourists only to certain members, favoring some over others, as well as not paying their guides and drivers enough. “I think it’s like mafia,” she blurted out, laughing. Both Ilimkazy and Ayganash gave me the feeling that, despite being young entrepreneurs in tourism, they were very well aware of their own strengths and potentials, having both taken many trainings and participated in projects aimed at connecting homestays across the country and even wider Central Asia. Also, both of them had told me their negative opinion of CBT, stemming from their own frustrating experience of wanting to join the network. After all, when all the tourism projects emphasized cooperation and learning from each other, why was it that CBT, Kyrgyzstan’s oldest and most successful rural tourism network, had closed its doors to them?

[Empowerment Opportunities for Women](#)

Early anthropological studies often assumed the hosts to be “the powerless, the poor, the colonized” (Leite and Graburn 2009, 40). Today, this negative tone is frequently reversed in studies of alternative forms of tourism like CBT, where instead its positive potential for

participation and empowerment is highlighted (Stronza 2001, 274). Some studies demonstrate that CBT positively impacts women by economically empowering them through job creation, which subsequently empowers their communities and creates further opportunities for other women (see McCall and Mearns 2021; Rusli, Firmansyah, and Az-Zahra 2022). In this section, I will address women's empowerment through CBT and rural tourism in Kyrgyzstan, maintaining a critical approach and providing ethnographic examples to show what extent women empowerment encompasses. Discussing current and historical gender hierarchies and patriarchy in Kyrgyzstan, Light (2018, 3) argues that while males have historically held more control, this has always been variable, as it remains today.

Kyrgyz society was traditionally strictly patrilinear, with married women "changing" to the lineage of their husbands. However, within the context of these patrilinear institutions, "women both have some agency within them and ample agency outside of them for decision-making" (ibid., 23). While the role of women in Kyrgyzstan's society is too complex to fully address here, it is noteworthy that after a forced "unveiling" and participation in the Soviet workforce, while simultaneously remaining in their traditional family roles, a trend of "gender neotraditionalism" emerged after independence (Beyer and Finke 2019, 318). This trend is partly due to state measures controlling women's mobility, sovereignty, and political power, as well as the increasing popularity of traditional values driven by the rise of Islam, which has a propensity of "producing new individual and collective identities" (Laruelle 2021, 94). Statistics reveal that Kyrgyzstan's women participate in the labor market at a 30% lower rate than men, while they spend almost twice as much time on unpaid care work (World Bank, n.d.).

This clearly indicates that women do face significantly lower income opportunities than men do. The study of Baktygulov et al. (2010) lists the creation of income and job opportunities as

the main “social results” of CBT in Kyrgyzstan, noting that most CBT group members belong to traditionally vulnerable groups, primarily women and, in some cases, pensioners. And indeed, among all my interlocutors and interviewees who worked directly in tourism, the majority were women. Examples include Asel, who operates a Bishkek-based tour company; Gulira, the coordinator of CBT Naryn; and the office workers in the local CBT group, Jamal and Gulum. Additionally, women ran most of the guesthouses I stayed at during my visit to Kyrgyzstan, whether they were affiliated with CBT or not. I am not the first researcher to notice this trend; there is a recent publication on the topic by Shumaila Yousafzai et al. (2023). The book is a visual anthropological work, mainly consisting of portraits (both visual and narrative) of female tourism entrepreneurs of CBT Kyrgyzstan.



Figure 11: Jamal (left) and Gulum in Naryn's CBT office.

The authors argue that the individual cases their study looked at demonstrate that “CBT not only encourages a deeper connection between the host and visitor, but it also promotes the empowerment of women, cultural conservation, social responsibility, and the enhancement

of livelihoods” (ibid., 19). The increase in employment opportunities for women aligns with previous anthropological studies on tourism, which however often found that this merely reinforces traditional gender roles rather than promoting true empowerment (Leite and Graburn 2009, 41). So, in what ways exactly does CBT Kyrgyzstan act to empower women to decide their own fate, instead of only replicating patriarchal structures? According to examples given in the study by Yousafzai et al. (2023), as well as my own observations, empowerment does occur when women start working in the tourism sector, mainly operating guesthouses, instead of remaining housewives. In this context, empowerment does not imply the overthrow of patriarchal structures but rather the ability of some women to forge a better life for themselves—an opportunity that rural tourism or CBT makes possible.

While some may criticize that women are merely adding paid care work to their existing unpaid care duties, it is important to note that over time, this could lead to women taking on more jobs and roles previously considered inaccessible to them (McCall and Mearns 2021). One crucial aspect of fostering this “slow change” is education, particularly the workshops and trainings offered by various organizations, which often explicitly focus on women. Development programs often cite gender empowerment as an outcome of their tourism projects. I asked Jekatarina Rudolph directly whether GIZ’s aim was to specifically help single and widowed women become tourism entrepreneurs in order to contribute to wider societal change regarding gender inequality. However, she mentioned that the focus on women’s empowerment was an afterthought to choosing tourism development and, at least in her specific project, could have been “added” to any other development program.⁷¹

⁷¹ Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

She relativized the statements of women empowerment through CBT by Yousafzai and others by saying that “this sector is very exploitative for women [...] The working conditions in the yurt camps, for example, are really terrible. During the season, they start at 6 a.m. and go to sleep at 11 p.m. Before that, the cows have been milked; they produce milk and cheese and then go to the yurt camp and cook. Then, when all the tourists have finished eating, they have their sheep to take care of; they have to wash up, clean the kitchen, get the yurt camp ready, and then they go home. One can’t really imagine that.”⁷² She also noted that gender roles in terms of work remain mostly traditional, which is consistent with other types of tourism that do not prioritize female empowerment (Leite and Graburn 2009, 41).

For instance, while women almost exclusively operate the guesthouses, they rarely become guides—a job associated with physical fitness and other “manly” attributes. While women like Gulira also assume leading and coordinating roles, Jekatarina argued that this does not indicate a significant change in gender structures in Kyrgyzstan, as women have traditionally been the “managers” of a household. And, as Yousafzai et al. argue, CBT can break down gender roles through an “equal division of household labor through a process of negotiation and renegotiation in everyday life performances” (Yousafzai et al. 2023, 21). Following the empowerment-model of Regina Scheyvens (1999), it can be said that CBT achieves economic empowerment, as well as psychological empowerment of women, which are connected to an increase in status and self-confidence (ibid., 247), as evidenced by the high numbers of women entrepreneurs and participants in training programs.

⁷² Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

If it achieves social and political empowerment for women, however, is less clear. While in the cases described by Yousafzai et al. (2023) the authors claim CBT brings women together in solidarity, increasing social cohesion, Begayim told me that creating more jobs for women and spaces where they can negotiate what is best for them as a group, is no straightforward process, because: “we have many old women who are very conservative. And, concerning many things, they are thinking in one way, we [Begayim and her mother] are thinking in another way. But we will try to be loyal with them.”⁷³ Considering all these factors, it can be asserted that the empowerment of women through rural tourism and CBT currently focuses more on the gradual improvement of individual livelihoods rather than a broader cultural shift.

To summarize this chapter, it can be said that the social and cultural impacts of CBT in terms of empowerment or community management often remain limited or have diminished since its inception. The creation of independent rural tourism guesthouses can be seen as another indirect impact of CBT. However, in some cases, this increased competition might lead to frustration or conflicts, as illustrated in the previous vignette. Concerning empowerment of women, CBT does hold great potentials, although it will most likely take time and not be without struggle, to reach a wider social and political empowerment of women. The following vignette highlights the case of Begayim, an independent guesthouse owner, and a typical “success story,” while grounding it in the reality of the circumstances that enable this success

⁷³ Begayim (Independent guesthouse owner), interview with the author, SPCE Naryn, November 2023.

Begayim: The Story of a Female Tourism Entrepreneur

During my time interviewing tourism providers, I have heard many stories of success. Naturally, those who wanted to talk to me were likely the ones with a decent education, English proficiency, and enough ambition and resources to spare some of their free time. The stories usually started with the realization that it is indeed possible to earn some money through tourism. While this may sound natural to Europeans, this awareness has only truly developed in Kyrgyzstan over the past decade. In some cases, as in Begayim's, it began with the tragedy of her husband and her mother-in-law's husband passing away within the span of only a few years. Besides the grief, this created an immediate need to earn money.

These success stories typically detailed practical issues or obstacles encountered during the establishment of the business. Bureaucracy and securing credits for building or renovating a guesthouse typically played a significant role. Almost immediately, however, all of these stories also included comments about the trainings or programs that the entrepreneurs had participated in, with the majority expressing strong gratitude for the significant contribution these programs had made to their successful business launch. Naturally, these stories unfolded similarly because I specifically asked for them, but it was still remarkable how much they overlapped in a few key aspects.

Returning to Begayim, she studied English at a Bishkek university but was unable to graduate because, as she said, "then I got married and it was finished." Soon after giving birth to her children, she resumed her career, working in various fields such as ecology, teaching, and finally tourism. Today, she works seasonally in Turkey during the summer and in Naryn, her birthplace, in the winter, where she serves as a receptionist in the city's only major hotel, the "Khan Tengri." Begayim lost her husband five years ago, while her mother-in-law lost hers two

years ago. So, the two women decided to work together and opened the guesthouse, “Tenir-Too.” She told me that finding work as a single woman in Kyrgyzstan is difficult. While the guesthouse provides the opportunity to earn a significant income, it also comes with the added stress of having to work around the clock.

In this case, both Begayim and her mother-in-law have their main jobs in addition to operating the guesthouse: “I have my own job, but there I can only work eight hours. In tourism you can earn more.” She then went on to detail a number of activities women traditionally perform, like cooking, taking care of the household, weaving carpets and making jam, into money. As previously mentioned, Begayim also benefited from numerous development projects and workshops in which they participated. Specifically, the two women received training from the Aga Khan-funded “Accelerate Prosperity” program. The experts, among them many women, taught them the basics of opening a tourism business and emphasized the community benefits: “First, they [women] should help themselves, then they will be able to help others.”

However, as her children reach university age, Begayim plans to move to Bishkek with them: “So, in Naryn, it [our life] is good [...] It’s a wonderful place; we have our own house, but I would prefer to have a flat in Bishkek. Because Bishkek is a big city with plenty of opportunities, of course. So, they will study at universities.” Begayim’s story centers on her tireless efforts to secure a brighter future for her children following a family tragedy. Tourism, specifically opening their own guesthouse, became the vehicle for realizing those dreams. Yet, this example of empowerment represents a slow and gradual change. It must be emphasized that, as in Begayim’s case, the opportunities that tourism presents for women often come with hard working conditions, working multiple jobs, and constantly applying for participation in workshops and trainings.

8: Hosts and Guests: Mediated Relations

This chapter deals with some of the oldest questions in the anthropology of tourism concerning the categories of hosts and guests (Smith 1978) and their interactions (Půtová 2018). Core to the interactions of hosts and guests have been debates around authenticity and commodification. The understanding of authenticity has evolved significantly, shifting from an absolute category often associated with a loss—where local culture is “made meaningless to the people who once believed in it” (Greenwood 1989, 131)—to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity as a folk category (Leite and Graburn 2009, 56). Dean MacCannell (1999) argued that because of the estrangement of “modern man” from society, he is on a quest for authenticity, which he seeks in tourism. Authenticity, as Cohen pointedly puts it, “is an eminently modern value whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence” (E. Cohen 1988, 373).

Regarding commoditization, I align with Cohen’s perspective that products created specifically for tourism can still be considered authentic, as authenticity primarily exists in tourists’ imaginations. Although most modern tourists are aware that alleged “authentic experiences” are constructed and marketed, they still enjoy consuming them. This is the contradictory condition of being “post-tourist,” as adequately defined by Urry (1990). Also, Cohen argues that commodification does not inevitably create inauthenticity. Rather, “objects, places, practices, and even people transformed for tourist consumption can themselves become accepted as “authentic” over time, in a process he calls “emergent authenticity” (Leite and Graburn 2009, 43). However, ignoring discussions of authenticity entirely would overlook how “enlightened post-tourists” like to demonstrate their worldliness.

Again, regarding the *impacts* of tourism, I am hesitant to adopt a one-sided perspective that

views changes in host culture as fundamentally negative and imposed by outsiders (Stronza 2001, 262). Therefore, in this chapter, I will explore the question of authenticity in this chapter by highlighting the interactions of hosts and guests, and the way that the former often shape the tourist encounter. Specifically, I will examine the ways in which tourism has influenced the notion of hospitality in Kyrgyzstan. Then, focusing on the guests, I will share some of my personal experiences, and on how tourists in my survey interpret authenticity, keeping in mind the aforementioned perspective. Following this, I will analyze some representations of Kyrgyz culture. Lastly, I theorize the interactions between hosts and guests as well as the way the tourists see, experience, and “imagine” (Salazar 2012b) Kyrgyzstan, taking inspiration from visual studies, especially the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990; Urry and Larsen 2011).

Nomadic Hospitality and Value Change

Kyrgyz people are well aware of their reputation for extraordinary hospitality. This was often one of the explanations with which people justified opening a homestay to me. Traditional hospitality, connected with the specifics of Kyrgyzstan’s rural and community-based tourism business model, brings to light interesting dynamics connected to the question of authenticity. Mirbek, a guide with many years of experience, knows many yurt owners personally. However, he often prefers taking “his” tourists to a yurt camp that was not previously involved in tourism, rather than to more experienced hosts: “I have found one family, and they are real shepherds. They’re not primarily working in tourism. And then I just asked them if they have an additional yurt. So, I would like to stay at your yurt with my tourists.”⁷⁴ According to his

⁷⁴ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

experience, this better fulfills the expectations of tourists, even though it may mean less comfort than a yurt camp that specializes in tourism. He said, “and then I understood. [...] [I]f, say, before we had been in a good, like a more comfortable place—which has everything like a normal bed and a shower, everything—but when we go to this [new] place, they don’t have anything. I mean, it’s not made specifically for tourism but rather for the typical lifestyle. But the tourists prefer this place.”⁷⁵

On the other hand, when it comes to the more established homestays, he has had some negative experiences: “And sometimes, when we go to visit them, bring a group of tourists there, you cannot see the owner of the yurt camp. It’s like a hostel.”⁷⁶ As mentioned before, most families, even if they regularly receive tourists, only earn an additional income from visitors, and their main work still revolves around keeping the animals on the *jailoo* (pasture). In that sense, it is not surprising that they don’t have an endless amount of time to greet the tourists. Yet, Mirbek’s experience with yurt owners becoming more distant hosts as they become professionalized raises important questions about changes in hospitality. “In anthropology of tourism, hospitality refers to ‘geography of proximity’” (Derrida et al. 2000, 2 quoted in Půtová 2018, 74). Through tourism, hosts cease being hosts and guests cease being guests in the original sense, which assumes a reciprocal relationship existing between the two sides based on mutual moral obligations.

Selwyn (2007) and others have examined how tourism and market rationality have altered this relationship. It is these changes that the seminal work titled “Hosts and Guests” (Smith 1978)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

addresses. But already back then, the authors acknowledged that the impact of tourism can be seen in more ways than one. Therefore, I am careful not to categorize the shift in the meaning of hospitality as a strictly negative value change. The reason why Mirbek's tourists prefer the less comfortable homestay over a more developed one is that they are not purchasing the hospitality service due to its high quality, but rather because what they seek is a special experience, which may transform "an instrumental transaction into an emotional transaction" (Půtová 2018, 74). Thus, the host-guest relationship in rural and community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan, while being commoditized, is successful because it creates more than a mere seller-customer relationship—even if that relationship is mediated by potential romantic and Orientalizing presumptions of tourists.

Hospitality in Central Asia is a complex issue. Contrary to earlier anthropological literature on hospitality, Magnus Mardsen (2023) sees merely referring to hospitality becoming commoditized as inadequate. Mardsen, for instance, goes into the context of Afghan traders, where hospitality may lose its altruistic nature and instead take on a more instrumental value (*ibid.*, 427). But more pressingly, he examines the existence of the historic caravanserai as already blending commercial activity and hospitality (*ibid.*, 430). Thus, he argues that it would be mistaken to just examine the commercialization of hospitality through tourism as a strictly modern phenomenon. And I tend to agree that the case that Mirbek outlined above points to the fact that tourism is complicating one-sided views of hospitality. Apart from having the power to create more meaningful interactions between hosts and guests, it demonstrates the host's adeptness in leveraging the rich history of hospitality in Central Asia through tourism. In this regard, it resembles the concept of "emergent authenticity" (E. Cohen 1988), rather than a static cultural model of a singular interpretation of hospitality.

The hospitality and generosity offered by some of my hosts during my travels in the Kyrgyz countryside were often nothing short of overwhelming. Typically, guesthouses allocate the largest and brightest rooms to tourists. My two hosts and their young daughter invited me to the dinner table when I visited a homestay in Kara-Suu village. As they ladled out the shorpo, a traditional soup, more family members gradually arrived. Two brothers, seemingly returning from herding animals, an uncle or two, and various other kin sat down one after the other. In the end, there were nine of us sitting around the table. Soon after, I retired to my room. It was large, with a single bed tucked into a corner. The house, which was relatively sprawling for rural Kyrgyz standards, had only two other rooms, except the common kitchen, dining room, and bathroom. I realized that the room next to mine must now accommodate at least four people, while I had exclusive use of the spacious guest room.

A similar approach is taken if the family has two permanent dining rooms: the smaller one with a low table, which is used while sitting on the carpet, and the larger one with a raised table and chairs. This second room is normally reserved for feasts and celebrations but also, in some cases, for visiting tourists. While staying with a travel partner in Kochkor, we were ashamedly aware of the fact that the large family crouched in the kitchen while we, special Western guests of honor, were to sit at the high table in the room next door. Just a day later, we were in Naryn, where our host spent an entire evening forcing us to eat more food, refusing to accept any excuses, and showing us such fierce hospitality that it felt akin to imprisonment. While this hospitality is connected to traditional notions, it is also part of the “show” for tourists (see MacCannell 1999). However, this sometimes may lead to contradictions with the underlying

principles of CBT, which aim for a meeting on “eye-level,” with tourists and hosts forming more egalitarian relationships than in other types of tourism.

The Tourist Oxymoron: The Flawed Search for the Flawless

With the statistics on who is visiting Kyrgyzstan already presented (Jenish 2018), I will briefly reproduce what my interlocutors told me about the different types of tourists, before I delve into the analysis of what typical tourists seeking rural tourism want or expect to see. Samuel, who has witnessed the Kyrgyz tourism landscape change since the year 2000, remembers that in these early years, mostly experienced travelers came to Kyrgyzstan, meaning older, well-traveled people who considered themselves experts. Later came younger people, “25 to 40 years old, who wanted to find something like active horseback riding, trekking, alpinism, hiking, and paragliding.”⁷⁷ Still, most of the tourists were coming from Europe and the US. Today, with advancements in infrastructure and the promotion of “glamping” by several tour providers, Kyrgyzstan is becoming a destination for those seeking greater comfort.

Asel and Elias told me that increasingly South Asian people, from countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, as well as more people from China, India, and the Gulf countries, were visiting the country and that correspondingly, tour operators now must fulfill a diverse range of wishes: “For example, travelers from Europe have totally different interests than travelers from China or South Asian countries.”⁷⁸ She said that Europeans are very active and like “running” up the mountains, whereas South Asian and Arab people like to take their time

⁷⁷ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

⁷⁸ Asel Ismailova and Ilyaz Zamanov (Tour Guide of Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

and do fewer active things. Mirbek seconded this, saying, “If they’re Arabs or if they’re Israeli people, they prefer more comfort. They don’t want to do typical things; they want more luxury.”⁷⁹ So, it would seem that most people interested in rural and community-based tourism involving nature-based activities, are still Europeans, even though the landscape is rapidly changing as more diverse products are developed. In my survey of tourists, seven respondents said that the main purpose of their travel was nature-based, six said they wanted to see a different culture, and five mentioned research and education as motivations.⁸⁰

However, it is important to say that not all tourists are the “typical” European backpacker tourists that I described here; they were simply the ones I interacted with the most. The follow-up question remains: Who exactly are these European tourists seeking out rural and community-based tourism and what do they care about? In my survey, of the six people who answered my question regarding authenticity, five said that authenticity is important or very important, while one person said it is “somewhat important.” This result shows that the question of authenticity is a prime concern for many Western tourists traveling to Kyrgyzstan. The last response was particularly intriguing as it addressed the paradox of desiring to experience authentic culture: “I will say that many travel bloggers somewhat overstate the ‘exotic’ aspects of the yurt camps in Kyrgyzstan. Most of the yurt camps tourists stayed in were geared *for* guests. Although they do house the host families, it doesn’t feel like you’re ‘stumbling’ into a nomadic family in the middle of nowhere. In a way, that feels a bit inauthentic because they are still very connected to society.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

⁸⁰ See table h.) for survey questions.

⁸¹ Response to my survey. Emphasis in the original answer. See table h.) for survey questions.

Clearly, some respondents had nuanced views on authenticity, making sense of their experiences with irony and an awareness of contradictions, akin to Urry's (1990) "post-tourists." For instance, at the World Nomad Games, Mathjis Pelkmans asked several Western visitors what authenticity meant to them (Pelkmans 2022b, 59). The observers defined authenticity as "referring to itself" yet still "judged through an Orientalizing gaze that emphasizes temporal and spatial difference" (ibid.). However, authenticity might also hold an entirely different meaning to the locals. Indeed, while visitors perceive authenticity in the absence of commercialism, for the Kyrgyz themselves, selling tourist trinkets does not diminish the authenticity of their products or performances, as it lacks the temporal connotations that Westerners associate with authenticity (ibid., 60). In the context of ecotourism, popular among European tourists studied here, authenticity acquires yet another dimension.

Ecotourism, with its romantic roots, holds a modernist view of nature as existing entirely separate from civilization: "The frame in which authenticity is judged is not likely to be that of the conservation biologist or environmental scientist or that of the anthropologist or local activist. Rather, we suggest that it is the framework of Nature (sic!) and the frontier: the supposed primordial state of people and the world before civilization killed off the exotic plants and animals and transformed the 'exotic' peoples" (West and Carrier 2004, 485). This worldview, based on a hard distinction between nature and culture, while not being consciously adapted by tourists, may still influence the underlying assumptions of ecotourism. In other words, if the tourists are expecting the hosts to be living stereotypical nomadic lives, it might lead to hosts construing this picture to cater to their wishes, akin to what MacCannell (1999) called "staged authenticity." But where are these images in tourists' minds coming from?

In tourism studies, the term “destination image” refers to „beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton 1979, 18). These images are purposefully created with the aim of attracting tourists to a certain place and can thus be seen as a form of branding closely related to various media. In the anthropological literature on tourism, a similar concept is called “tourism imaginaries,” although it is used in an analytic, instead of an instrumental way. While “imagination” has been theorized about by a variety of disciplines in vastly different ways, it allows anthropologists of tourism to make sense of how the complex mechanisms allowing socially transmitted representations “interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2012b, 2). Imaginaries exist both on a collective and an individual level, and can be analyzed as processes of meaning-creation and as the product of this process.

Yet, they remain more “unspoken” than concrete ideologies. In the context of tourism, imaginaries are everywhere, shaping the host-guest encounter both before the voyage even takes place, as well as at the moment they interact. Salazar argues that examining the origins and dissemination of these tourism imaginaries helps dismantle the “ideological, political, and socio-cultural stereotypes and clichés” so often associated with tourism (ibid., 3). For this task, he highlights the importance of studying travel guides, media and the work of tourism guides, who promote and circulate these images. Attention should be paid, he argues, to “ways in which values, meanings, and forms of knowledge can be altered, changed and renegotiated at all points” (ibid., 15). Hence, it is important to examine how rural tourism and CBT conform to and enforce existing stereotypes about Kyrgyzstan or in what ways they might transcend these images.

Tourist Expectations and Cultural Representations

Collecting – at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible – implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss. The collection contains what “deserves” to be kept, remembered, and treasured. Artifacts and customs saved out of time. Anthropological culture collectors have typically gathered what “seems” traditional – what by definition is opposed to modernity.

James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture* (1988, 231)

If studying the tourists’ search for authenticity, being an “impossible quest” (Bruner 2001, 898) doesn’t give the most insightful answers, the question then is: *what can become* a tourist site, and *how* does it do so? I will explore this question by using both Salazar’s theory of “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar 2010; 2012b) as well as Urry’s “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990). In my survey, I asked tourists the following: “What were your expectations before coming to Kyrgyzstan? What were you most looking forward to, and were these expectations fulfilled?”⁸² Only two out of eight respondents answered that they had little to no expectations. Of the other six, five mentioned some form of “beautiful” or “different” nature, and three of them mentioned locals or “different lifestyles,” one explicitly referring to wanting to see “semi-nomads.” This is unsurprising, as “[t]ravel and outdoor adventure brochures, as well as photo and television reportages, depict a magical landscape with spectacular barren mountains dotted with nomads on horseback. These suggestive images instantly invite us to discover a remote world in a lost paradise” (Pétric 2015, vii). These images were deliberately created during the formation of the initial ecotourism and CBT enterprises in Kyrgyzstan.

⁸² See table h.) for survey questions.

As Nicola Palmer writes, although ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, each have their own ways of living in relation to nature, ecotourism and CBT explicitly promote the image of the pastoralist Kyrgyz. Thus, through this representation, “local culture [comes to be] based on the culture of the ethnic Kyrgyz” (Palmer 2006, 47). Some authors argue that consumer culture deeply embeds the promotion of natural beauty and mountainous landscapes within an ecotourism context (Ryan, Hughes, and Chirgwin 2000). This includes regulating or “marking off” areas marketed as particularly beautiful and deserving of tourists’ time. While these sites do not intrinsically possess some special value, they become valuable through tourist consumption and the emotional experience accompanying them. Hence, “the natural is reduced to signs upon which the tourist gazes, one which is both partial and holistic. It is partial because it ignores the complex interaction between history, flora, and fauna that make up the site. It is holistic because it deals with a sense of timelessness of those things natural” (ibid., 159).

Ryan et al.’s study revealed that meeting visitors’ expectations at scenic viewpoints was the primary source of satisfaction, highlighting the significance of a carefully crafted destination image in marketing. However, it also showed that meeting expectations through a positive emotional response in ecotourism is necessarily restrictive and simplistic, as it doesn’t allow for more complex views of the history of a place; its “appeal is affective rather than cognitive” (ibid., 160). But what happens when expectations aren’t met? Despite the positive tourism imaginary associated with Kyrgyzstan, “a more negative image also exists in some media, where Kyrgyzstan is described as a ravaged natural and/or social world. They claim that Soviet-era industrialization has left the country’s inhabitants with nothing but open-air toxic dumps. The country is described as a social world on the road to perdition, plagued by privatization,

Islamization, and poverty, heightened by the growth in illegal activities ranging from prostitution and heroin smuggling to organ trafficking” (Pétric 2015, vii).

In my survey, respondents expressed satisfaction with their expectations compared to what they found, with the only significant discrepancy being entirely positive: “I thought it would be dangerous, but I have never felt so safe in a country as a solo traveling woman.”⁸³ Similarly, an analysis of tourists sentiments before and after visiting Central Asia, showed that “incongruence with destination image,” as previously ambiguous or negative notions about the region, changed for the better after tourists’ visit (Lee et al. 2012). Regarding ecotourism, another quantitative study found that tourists consuming CBT services in Central Asia, despite having a high self-claimed interest in sustainability from the outset, generally reported a lack of it or at least significant room for improvement (Usmonova, Alieva, and León 2022). These ambiguous perceptions of sustainability were reflected in my survey, where some thought “Kyrgyzstan is on the way to one of the best ecotourism destinations;” while others said that “[...] the term “eco” is mainly for marketing;” or that “Unfortunately, there is already a garbage problem in Kyrgyzstan with a lot of plastic lying around in nature.”⁸⁴

Imaginaries of the place one visits, although “intangible,” can “become visible in the form of images and discourses” (Salazar 2012b, 4). A whole class of mediators, in turn, produce and reproduce these images and discourses, shaping the preconceptions about the destination. Having called this chapter provocatively “Hosts and Guests,” I believe in the significant importance of this third group of individuals for shaping the host-guest encounter. One category of mediators includes travel writers and guidebooks. Cynthia Werner cites the

⁸³ See table h.) for survey questions.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

complaints of a tour company about the Lonely Planet travel guide, which described Naryn as “a ‘fairly dismal place,’ ‘full of officers and soldiers,’ ‘desperately poor’ Kyrgyz, and ‘aggressive’ drunks” (Werner 2003, 147). Another type of mediators, which Salazar claims to be of great relevance both for the study of tourism imaginaries and CBT, are guides, as they play a large role in either reproducing stereotypes, or diversifying representations of host communities (Salazar 2012a).

There are formal trainings for guides in Kyrgyzstan, mostly coordinated by KATO. However, Mirbek critiqued them for presenting an overly Russian view of history: “I know the history of Kyrgyzstan very well, but when I was studying with KATO, there was a teacher, a professor from the Russian Slavic University in Kyrgyzstan, he was Russian, and his telling of the history of Kyrgyzstan was more like Russian version of our history. [...] And he didn’t want to tell us about the genocide of 1916 for example. [...] So, that’s why you should learn about history yourself.”⁸⁵ Mirbek acknowledged that guides have a huge responsibility to present their country to tourists and not eschew its complex history and politics. He recounted the story of a group of Swiss tourists who pelted him with questions day and night. Upon the completion of their trip around Kyrgyzstan, they revealed to him that they had assigned him a “mark” for his answers, aiming to test him due to past negative experiences with other guides. However, most guides do it only as a summer job.⁸⁶ Thus, they often lack even a flawed training, which may lead to unknowingly reproducing stereotypes in order to please tourists’ expectations.

⁸⁵ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

⁸⁶ Bek and Chyngyz (Coordinator and Guide of CBT Kochkor), interview with the author, CBT Kochkor office, November 2023.

Interactions beyond the Imaginary

Apart from the natural sights that Kyrgyzstan is well-known for and the less emblematic historical sites, the local community itself has become the principal site of tourist consumption in rural tourism and CBT. A primary source of the symbolic power of tourism, as a leisure activity, is its separation from the “ordinary” aspects of everyday working life (Urry 1990, 2). It is the *gaze* that establishes the barrier between the ordinary and the extraordinary (ibid., 12). In rural and community-based tourism, where part of the goal is to “experience local everyday life,” things that are ordinary or mundane for the “Other,” come to be seen as extra-ordinary or special for the tourist. The gaze, as a social technique, is a learned skill. In practice, locals often don’t realize that their daily lives can captivate outsiders.

Sunghan Cho, developing a rural tourism project with the Korean Development Agency KOICA, summarizes this as follows: “They [the hosts] didn’t know that their normal life can be a touristic experience.”⁸⁷ While Sunghan’s statement implies that their development program aims to teach locals the value of their own culture, it is also true that CBT and rural tourism allow locals to express themselves independently, rather than relying on external presentations. Since rural tourism allows guests to interact with their hosts in an unfiltered home setting, it theoretically enables them to share what they find important about their lives in a way that aligns with their desired perception—unless overridden by an overzealous guide. In my experience, this included hosts portraying themselves as modern businesspeople while also highlighting their connections to traditions such as folk music or felt carpets.

⁸⁷ Sanghun Cho (CEO of Kyrgyz Friends), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

Often, they were more eager to show me amusing social media videos on their smartphones rather than a contrived image of what I might have imagined as authentic Kyrgyz life. This suggests that the tourist gaze is not omnipotent in determining guest-host relations. In their 2011 revision of the theory, Urry and Larsen make the “gaze” more relational and contested, considering the “performance turn” and incorporating sensations beyond “seeing” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 201-2). Even if the tourists gaze is specifically directed to an “authentic” scene by a knowledgeable guide, like in the earlier example of Mirbek taking tourists explicitly to “non-professional” hosts, a “scripted” performance can be broken up by spontaneous interactions by embodied practices and other fellow tourists, which might diminish the “total institution” of the tour guide directing the visitor’s attention.

Chris Gibson (2010, 522) reminds us that, unlike other domains of production, tourism doesn’t hide the working conditions. Instead, it brings the tourist close to the workers and their conditions, often leading to feelings of guilt and shame among tourists. Gibson argues that ethical enterprises (such as CBT) do not automatically lead to ethical encounters between hosts and guests (ibid., 523). I agree with Gibson that tourism products labeled “ethical,” might be used to justify the travel against tourists own conscience, glossing over potentially unethical or exploitative relations. The theory of the tourist gaze is supplemented by studying different ways of sensory engagement between hosts and tourists (ibid., 524). The key point here is that the visual sense, by default, creates a barrier between the self and the world. Emphasizing other senses, such as food tasting, communal dancing, and music, can break this binary by experiencing the same sensations together, allowing “rehearsed tourist roles [to] have little coherence in these settings” (Edensor 2001, 77).

In Kyrgyzstan, efforts are underway to broaden the ways tourists interact with locals, often emphasizing co-creation. For example, Zhyldyz, working for JICA, is developing a way for tourists to make a small clay statue of the sight they are visiting instead of simply buying it from locals.⁸⁸ Similarly, Viktoria Petrova, working for UNDP, is developing “creative tourism” with local communities of women artisans (Petrova 2022). While interviewing Surekha, she suggested a way to do something for the environment and create long-lasting engagement between the tourists and the place they are visiting (in this case Naryn) at the same time, through having them join tree-planting in the city’s surroundings.⁸⁹ Additionally, the CBTs are incorporating more and more “masterclasses” into their touristic offerings. While this may seem trivial, I believe there can be a crucial difference in experience when visiting a “show” or a “masterclass,” precisely through the involvement of more senses than the gaze and through generating interactions and shared experiences.

Turning back to the hosts, what do they gain from the tourism interaction in terms of experiences? Despite asking some critical questions, the hosts’ descriptions of their encounters with tourists were almost unequivocally positive. Begayim cited the following as her main motivation to work in tourism: “To be close to each other in a good way. I mean; to introduce our countries to each other [...] Tourism helps us to be closer to each other and to study each other’s traditions.”⁹⁰ Elias shared with me that his greatest motivation for working

⁸⁸ Zhyldyz Nurlanbek (JAICA project assistant), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

⁸⁹ Surekha Ghogale (NURP project manager), interview with the author, NURP office in Naryn, September 2023.

⁹⁰ Begayim (Independent guesthouse owner), interview with the author, SPCE Naryn, November 2023.

in tourism is to bring people from different backgrounds together: “So in the world, everyone is the same. There are no differences between people, just different lifestyles.”⁹¹

Also, the tourists in my survey spoke in very positive tones about their interactions:⁹² “I was traveling on my own [...] and found the locals to be very helpful, interested in communication [...] They were astonishingly open about their own economic struggles and political views, and they were very interested in my background and my view of their country.” Another answered, “They were very friendly overall and enjoyed European tourists a lot.” Besides friendliness and hospitality, tourists noted the hosts’ curiosity and willingness to interact with them, suggesting this quality is lacking in other types of tourism they might have experienced. However, respondents also mentioned their struggles with giving in to any sort of meaningful interaction due to the existing language barrier, echoing the findings of Dolezal (2015).

In conclusion, it seems that rural and community-based tourism might in some cases allow for less mediated interactions between hosts and guests, given that both sides are open towards the encounter, albeit with some restrictions. This potential is limited by certain “Othering” imaginaries shaping their preconceptions, as well as mere language constraints. What I have also aimed to show in this section, is that individual tourists, whose “gaze” admittedly shapes tourism encounters and projects power, are often influenced by abstract imaginaries, or mere marketing, as well as the narratives of guides. Despite the increasing commodification of hospitality, I believe that CBT and rural tourism can still create meaningful experiences, especially through co-creation like workshops and masterclasses.

⁹¹ Ilyaz Zamanov (Tour Guide at Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

⁹² See table h.) for survey questions.

9: Development Organizations, Tourism Brokers and Education

Tourism involves more than just hosts and guests; it encompasses a variety of different actors and stakeholders (Leite and Graburn 2009, 40). In this chapter, following Cheong and Miller (2000), I will focus on tourism as a political phenomenon, especially focusing on the tourism middlemen, or brokers. Having already touched on this category of actors in the form of guides and travel writers in the last chapter, brokers can be broadly defined as those people “who derive a living (receive monetary remuneration) for an involvement with tourism production,” with the exception of hosts themselves (ibid., 379). While guides and tourism workers are “private-sector brokers,” here I focus on development workers and the specialists that work together with those international donors on the intermediary and local level, referred to as “public” or “consultation brokers” (ibid.).

In my own research, these development projects presented both a safe haven and an unknown territory. Invitations to donor’s offices or lunch meetings with development officials in Bishkek’s more Western-style cafés lulled me into a false sense of familiarity. I often interacted with Europeans working in international organizations or Kyrgyz and Russian individuals who had received education or training abroad. Although they spoke English and our academic vocabulary overlapped in some areas, studying the organizational side of things in their unique development language was a novel experience for me. As an anthropology student, navigating this sphere of contacts was challenging because, despite our similar cultural backgrounds, there were significant differences in our disciplines.

This required me to adjust not only to drinking *kymyz* (sour mare’s milk), which hosts often offered as a welcome gift, but also to become familiar with development jargon, such as

referring to tourism as a “cross-cutting sector.” In this chapter, I will first provide a broad overview of development projects that include tourism, highlighting some notable examples. Next, I will present a critical perspective from one of my interviewees, challenging the methods used in tourism development in Kyrgyzstan. This will lead to a discussion on clashing perspectives between donors and locals, and the focus on sustainability in development projects. Primarily, I will critique the projects’ focus on marketing and the “greenwashing” of tourism. The chapter concludes with a general discussion on power dynamics in tourism development.

Overview of Tourism Development in Kyrgyzstan

Zhyldyz, working for JICA, explained their project’s perspective on the potential of tourism for development: “Well, tourism is known as a cross-cutting sector [...] It can be within private sector development; it can be an infrastructure project; it can be, I don’t know, a social development project, depending on what side you take of tourism development.”⁹³ Thus, tourism is often viewed as part of broader goals that might not initially seem related to developing tourism businesses, including other “popular topics” in development such as risk management and sustainability.⁹⁴ Having already established the history of how CBT and rural tourism were initially developed by external organizations, I will now provide an overview of some current tourism development projects in Kyrgyzstan, highlighting a few in depth. I have listed all the projects I contacted, interviewed, or received information about during my stay

⁹³ Zhyldyz Nurlanbek (JAICA project assistant), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

⁹⁴ Sergej (Deputy Director of Novinomad tour company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

in Kyrgyzstan in table g.) in the Appendix. A sizeable amount of these projects, in some way or another, cooperated with the existing CBT networks or even developed entirely new CBT destinations.

A typical project that includes tourism among other development goals is the GIZ “Integrated Rural Development Program” in Jalal-Abad province. The main focus was on integrating agricultural workers into supply chains by establishing cooperatives for specific agricultural products while simultaneously developing rural tourism. Established relationships with farmers enabled linking them with tour operators. Additional measures included developing a destination management organization (DMO), creating the first tourism cooperative, founding a yurt camp, and collaborating with the NGOs KCBTA and KATO to promote “38 business projects in tourism, including launching coffee shops, souvenir and artisan shops, and improving hygiene conditions in guesthouses” (GIZ 2023). Furthermore, three new CBT destinations were established in Sary-Chelek, Kazarman, and Toktogul, along with infrastructure such as information centers and signboards directing visitors to sights.⁹⁵ The project also developed new tourism products specifically for women and religious tourism, guides received training for adventure tourism, and PPDs (public-private dialogues) were conducted. I highlighted the project here because it covers a wide range of interventions, giving an overview of what tourism development in Kyrgyzstan can encompass as part of wider development goals.

An example of a project specifically focused solely on tourism development is Kyrgyz Friends, or the “Inclusive Business Solution” project by Korean development agency KOICA, launched

⁹⁵ Jekatarina Rudolph. GIZ development worker. 2023. Personal communication.

in cooperation with a private tour company. Unlike others, this project does not cooperate with the existing CBT infrastructure but instead is developing its own version. Sunghan Choo, inspired by the CBTs, distinguishes Kyrgyz Friends by focusing on establishing a single local homestay in each village. As of this writing, ten “culture villages” offer a Kyrgyz Friends homestay, some of which have also established community centers. Similar to CBT, the project’s aim is to create a network of homestays while charging a relatively low commission of 10%.⁹⁶ Their model is as follows: 70% of the project funds come from KOICA and 30% from private sources. The project lasts for four years, during which most training and workshops take place, after which the tour company Kyrgyz Friends continues to operate. I chose to highlight Kyrgyz Friends here because it is an outlier, specifically directed at tourism development without relying much on existing structures like CBT.

Critical Perspectives on Tourism Development

I was surprised, not by the number of tourism development projects, but by the sheer number of small trainings and workshops conducted by these projects and other organizations. This, along with Gulira’s statement about the lack of education on the environment and tourism being a reason for CBT’s “expiring” business model and the younger generation joining only for money, presented a strange conundrum.⁹⁷ Is it truly the lack of educational opportunities that is causing the diminishing conviction in CBT’s values, as described by Gulira? Donor-funded trainings provide promising opportunities for tour

⁹⁶ Sanghun Cho (CEO of Kyrgyz Friends), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

⁹⁷ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

operators and local tourism businesses. While I was interviewing Ilimkazy, a guesthouse owner in Naryn City, he proudly showed me the he kept displayed in his living room. The tour operator, Asel, also spoke in great praise of the work that donors are doing in terms of sustainability and cultural development. She explained that even if the donor project doesn't directly aim to develop tourism but, for example, promotes some aspect of traditional culture, tour companies come in later and pick up the pieces: "They are promoting cultural diversity, but their work helps us as well. You know, we use their efforts, their work."⁹⁸ However, she acknowledged that some projects fail and are disbanded after the donor's retreat.



Figure 12: Ilimkazy's Certificates. Photocollage by the author.

Samuel, CEO of "Nomad's Land," one of the oldest and biggest tour agencies active in Kyrgyzstan, was less positive about development companies: "Even sometimes within one

⁹⁸ Asel Ismailova (Director of Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

donor organization, you have many projects that are confused [...] For instance, they have two tourism projects: one is supported by the Swiss government, and the other is supported by the European Union [...] That's difficult to work with, since most of the time they impose what they want and don't ask what local people want or need. For example, they develop a new festival to attract tourists, and next year nobody wants to organize the festival. So, the donor has to organize it again, and they say, 'Why don't you want to organize this festival?' Because they did not ask to organize this festival."⁹⁹ Hence, Samuel questions whether the development projects are necessarily always in the hosts' best interests. Additionally, he critiqued the focus of most projects on promotion or developing new products. While this might slightly increase tourist numbers, the larger infrastructural restrictions remain, which he sees as the true hindrance to further tourism influx.

Even in Karakol, one of the most developed tourist cities, he stated that the infrastructure, particularly in terms of bed availability and energy supply, is severely lacking. As explained in Chapter 6, many of my interlocutors told me that tourism development lacks an overall strategy. However, Samuel sees the donors themselves as part of the problem, as their projects are poorly coordinated. Samuel also claimed that the donors give away their money too easily. Crucially, in order to secure those funds, there must be significant expertise in writing projects, which is why it is always the same organizations (KATO and KCBTA) that secure those positions. However, he added that the results of those workshops facilitated by these two organizations don't match their funding level.

⁹⁹ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

Instead, Samuel conducts his own trainings in the destinations where his company operates, and according to him, with better results. He stated, “I’m not stopping just because the donor stops giving me money.”¹⁰⁰ He cited figures showing that his trainings were vastly more attended than similar ones organized by local CBT groups and funded by Helvetas. Interestingly, he perceives the government as having become reliant on external funding for tourism development, not taking any independent actions without donor money. According to him, the government has become highly dependent on external funding for tourism development. Samuel’s critiques, while sometimes seeming overly harsh, provide valuable perspectives on various topics regarding tourism development. Aware of some of the criticisms of traditional “developmental anthropology,” which often uncritically accepted the underlying presumptions of development agendas (Escobar 1991; Gow 1993), Samuel’s criticisms seem especially valuable for this study. While not all of his claims can be investigated, his statements encouraged me to adopt a critical approach while analyzing my interviews with development organizations.

Participation of Locals and Conflicting Priorities

Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.

Michel Foucault *Archaeology of Knowledge* ([1972] 2013, 46)

The following example illustrates how local ambitions can collide with development agendas. In the previously described GIZ project, a disagreement arose with an interest group from the

¹⁰⁰ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

“gold-rich” village of Chat-Kal, who wished to develop ski tourism using their mining profits. GIZ attempted to dissuade them, perceiving ski tourism as antiquated and unsustainable: “You first have to build the road leading there; you have to build the entire slope infrastructure, maintain it, and technically ensure everything. It just costs so much money, and when the gold mines close, they won’t have any money left. Especially as it [ski-tourism] doesn’t correspond to the trend at all.”¹⁰¹ These projects incorporate community-based planning, emphasizing local participation, control, and decision-making. However, the Chat-Kal case demonstrates that development projects support local initiatives only when they align with their own ideas. Similarly, Butcher’s (2008) study on ecotourism for conservation argued that the “grand claims” of local control and “people-centered” development often fall short, development often fall short, revealing a more instrumental view of community participation that applies only to the implementation of individual projects with pre-defined goals.

The JICA project exemplifies a less severe conflict between the perspectives of donors and local residents.¹⁰² It includes cooperation with “village heads,” who “disseminate information to the village population and [...] help with events, information collection.”¹⁰³ However, since the project in this case is a “technical cooperation project,” this may lead to disappointment among locals, as the results are less tangible than constructing a new museum directly, as Zhyldyz admitted. Indeed, it was the ministry of culture who first suggested building a museum on the site: “The original request was to build some infrastructure; to build a museum in the town of Suyavla [...] It was out of our scope. I mean, it was difficult to realize, so we shifted to

¹⁰¹ Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

¹⁰² See table g.) in the Appendix.

¹⁰³ Zhyldyz Nurlanbek (JAICA project assistant), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

technical cooperation.”¹⁰⁴ It is often the case that, instead of developing “big infrastructure,” human resource development and, in this case, “technical transferring,” are the goals of development projects. The ideal success of the project, Zhyldyz told me, would be if the oblast government integrated the proposed document from the JICA project into official policy.

However, Zhyldyz herself admitted that “the vision of the private sector and [...] the government are different.” The tourism law in Kyrgyzstan, being over 30 years old, and the government’s notorious bureaucracy and slow pace of change make this cooperation tedious at best. Working on another GIZ project, titled “Green Economy,” Denis discussed the challenges of implementing a sustainability-focused project in a country where this concept is not widely known or accepted. In this context, he jokingly referred to their efforts as “green brainwashing.”¹⁰⁵ Their project cooperates with local organizations and universities over three years and conducts workshops on the green economy nationally. I could not get precise information on this education or how much it falls into the trap of “neoliberal-oriented education for sustainable development” (Kopnina 2013). Helen Kopnina, for instance, argued that overwhelmingly education for sustainable development assigns nature to the role of a resource to be exploited.

Denis also mentioned the difficulty of getting people in rural areas to change their behavior without a specific economic incentive. Therefore, linking this behavior change to a specific percentage of increased income—he cited 30 percent as an example—is crucial for encouraging the adoption of green technologies or behaviors. One important mechanism to

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Denis Krasnozhonov (Senior advisor at GIZ), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

convince local hosts to become certified as “green” is to highlight that more tourists are seeking sustainable tourism, which will bring them more visitors. Denis cited teaching vegetarian cuisine to guesthouses as a success for sustainability. However, he admitted that the real culprits are the emissions from tourists flying to Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁶ Tourism researchers and anthropologists alike have long questioned the viability of concepts like green growth for tourism.

Tourism Education and The Myth of Green Growth

It is a cruel joke to describe a situation in which absolute growth in emissions and other impacts continue to expand as a result of tourism growth exceeding efficiency gains as ‘green growth’ or a ‘green economy’. But this is what is being done. Are you laughing yet?

Colin Michael Hall *Economic Greenwash* (2015, 349)

The quote above suggests that the transport emissions from tourism’s expansion significantly surpass the minor gains from green tourism offerings, as illustrated by the last example. Hall highlights the fundamental difference between sustainable growth and sustainable development (ibid., 351). Sustainable growth fosters increased economic output along with greater use of materials, resources, and energy (MRE), while sustainable development enhances output quality without consuming more resources. I agree with Hall that “green growth” is not a revolutionary new economic paradigm, but rather a subtle reform of the old, which is inherently still “unsustainably geared towards economic growth” (ibid., 354). Hall emphasizes the need for changing tourism education, specifically its promotion of “growth-

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

ism.” So, what does donor-funded tourism education look like in Kyrgyzstan? In Naryn, the Aga Khan development agency both funds entrepreneurship courses in the aforementioned “School of Professional and Continued Education,” which include tourism modules, and helps establish a three-year tourism education program at Naryn State University.

In academia, there has traditionally been a differentiation between tourism *training* and tourism *education*. The SPCE’s “entrepreneurship” training, focuses not only on tourism but also on helping students open various small businesses, including cattle breeding, or cafés and restaurants.¹⁰⁷ In that sense, entrepreneurship should also not be overstated or interpreted as meaning the same as in Europe. However, Slocum et al. argue that due to neoliberalism’s influence on academia, tourism education in nine different countries is increasingly becoming more like training, losing its ability to teach critical thinking (Slocum, Dimitrov, and Webb 2019). Indeed, when I examined the tourism programs offered by Bishkek universities, they mostly seemed like glorified trainings for becoming hotel managers.

While these trainings were not my principal focus, I spoke with professors at Naryn State University, who had recently launched their tourism education course. Their new program also teaches a very “hands-on” approach to tourism, however also includes trainings on sustainability. Since the course was just starting, and the interview had to be translated, I could not get much detailed information. Yet, it seemed that, while they tried to include “everything” in their curriculum, through cooperation with the Aga Khan-funded “Mountain Universities Partnership” program, there would be some emphasis on sustainable mountain tourism (Naryn State University 2023). Like most developer-funded tourism programs, the Green Tour

¹⁰⁷ Nurbek Saparov (Director of KATO), interview with the author, translated from Russian, Bishkek office, October 2023.

project¹⁰⁸ also involves standardizations and certificates, specifically about sustainability, acting as a sign of approval for both tourists and tour guides. The project, supervised by Helvetas, explicitly aims to create sustainable tourism products, implement waste management schemes, and provide counseling for MSMEs on securing access to “green finance” (Helvetas 2024).

They initially coached tour providers who were interested in sustainability and held a contest to create green tours between them, awarding the winners with the “travel life” label.¹⁰⁹ Writing about these sustainability labels in tourism, David Font concludes: “There are too many ecolabels, with different meanings, criteria, geographical scope, confusing messages, limited expertise and expensive systems [...]” (Font 2002, 203). Writing in 2002, he already identified over 100 green certificates and was critical of their proposed effect on tourists’ sustainability choices. He also critiques that the training required to obtain these labels and certifications is almost exclusively available through extensive donor funding. During my research, I discovered that a few individuals, such as Ayganash, the subject of the following vignette, actively participate in numerous trainings. Once again, this signals that while a univocally positive attitude towards entrepreneurship seems to be the case among young people in Kyrgyzstan, there is no equal access to opportunities (Usov 2023).

A different project by the French agency ACTED (80% funded by EU Switch Asia), which supplies solar panels to remote yurt camps, is, in my opinion, an example of a development project that provides real sustainability benefits. The previously discussed Jyrgal’s Jurt camp at

¹⁰⁸ See table g.) in the Appendix.

¹⁰⁹ Nargiza Kudaiberdieva (Helvetas project manager), interview with the author, Bishkek office, October 2023.

Kel Suu is so remote that this is their only option to get electricity besides a diesel generator. However, the main focus of the ACTED project was again on sustainability education, as well as hosting “green fairs” to promote green tourism. In the end, it is thus ultimately designed to lead to more growth, and the question of how much growth an area like Kel Suu can handle remains unanswered. Returning to the conundrum concerning tourism education, it seems like there is not necessarily a lack in the quantity of *education as training* but maybe a lack in the quality of *education as learning*, or critical thinking (Slocum, Dimitrov, and Webb 2019). The trainings prioritize practical aspects such as establishing a homestay, mastering basic logistics and hospitality skills, and obtaining funding. Here, the question becomes whether the trainings are equally accessible to everyone. The second common point is marketing, or connecting locals to the international tourism market, which will be the topic of the last subchapter.

The Perpetual Need for Training

Ayganash exemplifies a businesswoman who benefited from her SPCE training. She stands out as she received a university education and went on to work for Kyrgyzstan’s biggest tour company, “Ak-Sai Travel,” in Bishkek for eight years. She quit her job due to marriage and childcare, a common occurrence in Kyrgyzstan, and moved back to Naryn. During the COVID pandemic, hosting friends at her house sparked the idea to open a guesthouse. To get help starting her business, she enrolled in a course offered by the SPCE: “While we were building this guest house and during the pandemic as well, we had a lot of time to study. So, I visited entrepreneurship courses, which helped me a lot. Because when our guesthouse opened, I already knew how to run a business. So how to do marketing, how to deal with finance, et cetera.”

She also participated in numerous UNDP trainings on online booking platforms, marketing, and hospitality. What helped her most was networking with other young entrepreneurs in the region and their experienced trainers. Ayganash said: “We had some kind of community of guest houses in Naryn.” However, the most significant obstacle she encountered was the unnecessarily slow bureaucracy, which she believes requires reform. Ayganash and her husband tried to keep their guesthouse running in winter, but coal heating costs and pollution made it unprofitable. This is why she plans to install a heat pump, making winter operations both affordable and sustainable. To fund her guesthouse, Ayganash took a credit of 1 million soms (around 11,000 USD) from a private bank, which in Kyrgyzstan is extremely expensive, starting at around 30% interest.¹¹⁰ However, she managed to pay it back at the end of the first year since opening. Having paid off the loan, the guesthouse is now actively earning money, and she plans to invest in equipment like the heat pump.

Additionally, her guesthouse is certified as a sustainable destination by the “green leaves” of the Travel Life label, awarded by the Green Tour project of Helvetas, which convinced her to invest in sustainable heating. Incidentally, Ayganash also works as a coach on this project and has attended many sustainability trainings conducted by it.

¹¹⁰ Denis Krasnozhonov (Senior advisor at GIZ), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

Power Dynamics in Tourism Development

While development can be regarded as a normative concept it is also very much about power and control. Who has power, what are their values and beliefs, how do they exercise their power, will they share power and who benefits as a result of their actions? [...] Questions of who benefits and who loses reflect the very nature of the relationship between tourism and development studies.

David J. Telfer *Development Studies and Tourism* (2009, 161)

Development institutions, while wielding the power to influence local realities themselves, are in turn “influenced by Western philosophical values and ideological orientation and mainly respond to external political and economic interests” (Tucker and Akama 2009, 506). In the rural and community-based tourism researched here, unlike in mass tourism, most of the profits stay with the hosts. Nevertheless, the demands of the global market ultimately shape its development in Kyrgyzstan (ibid., 507). In other words, the current development programs’ emphasis on “poverty alleviation, growth of the individual through education and community capacity building over measurement of GDP growth as a proxy for well-being” (Harris-Smith and Palmer 2022, 122) aligns closely with the premises of CBT and reflects trends like globalization and neoliberalism, which will be discussed further in the thesis conclusion. Here, I will look at the distribution of “power” in Kyrgyz tourism development and the question of “dependency.”

Following Samuel’s complaints, I investigated the positions of two organizations, KCBTA and KATO, which are the main partners of both the GIZ projects and the Helvetas Green Tour project. Regarding the relationship between KCBTA and the development organizations, Asylbek stated that they are financially self-sustaining through their travel agency, but donor projects remain their second major source of income, which they rely on for expansion or extra

funding.¹¹¹ Goodwin and Santili (2009) found that most CBT projects that achieved financial independence constituted only a small part of the projects they examined, and it usually took more than five years to reach this status. KATO, formerly the Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators, has renamed itself the Kyrgyz Association of Tourism Organizations to include educational institutions like universities in the network.¹¹² KATO's role is multifaceted: they address individual problems of tour operators or tourists while also working to alleviate larger systemic issues through lobbying and policy advice.¹¹³ It serves as a platform for coordination among different actors in the tourism sector and conducts various trainings, while collaborating directly with almost all development projects.

Through this relationship, they wield significant influence and serve as a conduit for international assistance organizations to impact the Kyrgyz tourism sector as a whole. This complicates the usual assumption of a post-colonial power relationship. To situate the study of tourism within the context of development, Britton (1982, 342) developed a model for tourism in developing countries. This model outlines the power hierarchy from the global headquarters of tourist firms, through national branch offices in urban areas, to rural micro- and small-scale tourism enterprises. He argued that foreign capitalist firms ultimately control the tourism market and the development paradigms that shape it. Kyrgyzstan's mostly Bishkek-based tour agencies, along with their overarching organizations, KATO and KCBTA, occupy the "second rung" of Britton's three-tiered model. Dependency theory argues that, historically, colonialism and imperialism caused structural issues in developing countries by integrating

¹¹¹ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

¹¹² Nurbek Nisharapov (SPCE country head), interview with the author, UCA Bishkek, November 2023.

¹¹³ Nurbek Saparov (Director of KATO), interview with the author, translated from Russian, Bishkek office, October 2023.

them into global capitalism for colonial benefit. This perspective connects underdevelopment in these regions to the industrial growth of developed nations, creating a “dependent development” shaped by historical economic and social patterns. Some dependency theorists called for a radical de-linking of industrial nations’ economies from those of developing countries to counteract this dependency (Telfer 2009, 154).

While rural tourism and CBT aim to be self-sustaining and benefit local economies, the centralization of specialists like KCBTA, KATO, and tour operators in the capital, Bishkek, makes rural tourism providers highly dependent on metropolitan actors, who are, in turn, influenced by and dependent on the global tourism market. As the head organization of CBT, KCBTA coordinates donor projects specifically related to community-based tourism. Meanwhile, KATO functions as a network to enhance cooperation within the Kyrgyz tourism sector as a whole. KATO is responsible for conducting most of the training related to development projects, which in turn cater to the demands of global tourism trends. Today, many of these trends are connected to sustainability. However, as I have argued in this chapter and will elaborate on in the conclusion, the “green growth” of tourism primarily stems from marketing strategies encouraging tourists to pursue eco-friendly travel, as Western consumer values increasingly align with sustainability (Sharpley and Telfer 2008, 155–56).

Development projects emphasize capacity building, aiming to decrease reliance on foreign investment in the future. However, recent focus on individual entrepreneurs in the trainings conducted by KATO and others, shows that a neoliberal view of economics underpins many of these projects. As others have pointed out, the “capacity-building” approach requires a combination with government support for long-term sustainability (Harris-Smith and Palmer 2022, 123). I have largely overlooked the government’s influence in shaping the tourism sector

in Kyrgyzstan because many interlocutors, like Samuel, assured me that the government doesn't act without financial support from external assistance organizations. The Department of Tourism is currently under the Ministry of Culture, which has fewer resources than other ministries, and "there are no government instruments or mechanisms that support tourism development on the regional or local level" (Borchardt 2018, 79). This adds to the impact that development projects have on the future of Kyrgyzstan's tourism and their ensuing responsibility.

To summarize, international development organizations, shaped by the global tourism market's trends and demands, determine the future course of tourism in Kyrgyzstan. They typically prioritize local participation pragmatically rather than fundamentally, especially when local interests conflict with those of donors, who can easily overrule them (Butcher 2008). Returning to one of Samuel's criticisms, since the development projects mostly focus on training and marketing instead of education that promotes critical thinking or infrastructure development, the growth imperative isn't questioned, and its consequences are inadequately addressed. While CBT and rural tourism were developed to empower local communities, I argue that Britton's three-tiered model still applies, creating dependencies on both the global tourism market and local specialists and tour agencies, mainly based in the capital.

10: Conclusion

Having presented my ethnographic evidence in detail as well as provided historical and conceptual context, I now return to the main research question of this paper: “What do different conceptions and applications of ‘community’ and of ‘value’ tell us about power relations within rural and community-based tourism (CBT) in Kyrgyzstan?” This conclusion synthesizes the key findings and arguments presented in this thesis. The first section examines the contradictions that arise when community logic clashes with the logic of exchange. I argue that in CBT Kyrgyzstan, these two different logics are incompatible, giving rise to conflicts of interest and the emergence of power structures. This analysis has theoretical implications for the study of community and alternative forms of tourism in the anthropology of tourism, as well as practical implications for tourism development.

The second section elaborates on the extra-economic values claimed by rural and community-based tourism, categorizing them into social, cultural and environmental values. The impact of neoliberalism on these claimed values will then be discussed, leading to the third section, which debates whether or not the alternative tourism forms like CBT rely on a neoliberal set of ontological presuppositions, specifically regarding the individualization of responsibility. It further explores the dependencies that arise from this dynamic, aiming to determine whether CBT Kyrgyzstan achieves the empowerment of local communities. In the final section, I summarize my findings and discuss their implications for future research.

Community between Reciprocity and Exchange

The widely used and often poorly defined concept of *community* warrants a critical examination in relation to its use in tourism development. Although usually applied positively, it can obscure hierarchies and violence, homogenizing diverse groups. My results show what the different conceptions of community imply for rural tourism in Kyrgyzstan and the concept of CBT as a whole. The question of whether we are achieving a functional community based on collective action or a reciprocal community rooted in mutual aid is especially relevant. Ilimkazy used the term community when referring to a WhatsApp group of 130 tourism workers in Naryn City.¹¹⁴ Within this broader community of tourism workers, he criticized the role of CBT for working for its own benefit and not supporting the whole community.

This leads me to argue that if one important aspect of a community is people working towards a common goal (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2666), Naryn's tourism lacks a singular community, instead being "split" between CBT and independent guesthouses. Ruiz-Ballesteros posits that understanding community within the framework of CBT necessitates focusing on the dynamic behavior of its members, concerning the two poles of reciprocity and collective action (ibid.). Regarding the internal dynamics of CBT Kyrgyzstan, it can be seen that it fulfills this functional aspect of collective action, with a few important caveats: some guesthouses, due to their location, profit more than others and some coordinators may abuse their own power. However, this narrow focus on the functional aspects and economic goals of a community, limits the possibility of "empowerment," claimed to be one of CBT's main benefits (Blackstock 2005, 41).

¹¹⁴ Ilimkazy (Independent guesthouse owner), interview with the author, Naryn guesthouse, November 2023.

The dimension of reciprocity and mutual aid seems to play a smaller role than anticipated in CBT Kyrgyzstan, as many of my interlocutors claimed that CBT had become more like a “corporation.”¹¹⁵ As explained in Chapter 7, Igor Rubinov (2014, 195–96) highlights the importance of “mutual indebtedness” in traditional rural communities in Central Asia, where social relations are deepened through ceremonial exchanges. While this may strain individual wealth, it provides reliable support in times of need. Reciprocity, both as giving and receiving, is critical for community formation (Mauss 1990). Creating a functional community from scratch is less powerful than building on one with existing common values and morals. Community requires active effort to function and exist. Or, as Ruiz-Ballesteros puts it, “community is not just the basis but the objective of community-based tourism, yet it is taken for granted in practically all studies on the subject” (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2023, 2664).

As shown by CBT Naryn, a community is shaped by its interactions with the outside. Thus, the future alignment or conflict of CBT and non-CBT guesthouses’ goals will profoundly influence their respective community development. Borchardt argues that the premise of aiming to include everyone in the community into the decision-making of CBT groups is flawed, as the organization represents only a small group compared to the entire community of local tourism workers (Borchardt 2018, 85). CBT’s functional approach excludes many from the tourism network, as seen in Naryn, where only 45–50 permanent CBT members exist in a region with nearly 300,000 people.¹¹⁶ Independent guesthouses, like those of Ayganash and Ilimkazy, are emerging more and more as Naryn’s tourism grows but are often not permitted to join the CBT network, as this would weaken the decision-making power of the current members, leading

¹¹⁵ Namely by Ayganash, Gulira, Ilimkazy and Mirbek. See table c) in the Appendix for details.

¹¹⁶ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

to frustration for those excluded. These independent rural tourism providers benefited from CBT's groundwork, but they lack its organized network, experience, coordinator elections, and the attention of development projects, which mostly cooperate with CBT.

Interviews revealed that local control and participation vary significantly among CBT groups, sometimes restricted or corrupted.¹¹⁷ Some CBT coordinators gain more power than intended and use it for personal gain, possibly due to a lack of understanding of existing power structures. The trend of some CBTs becoming "family businesses" recalls Yoshida's (2005) research, introduced in Chapter 7, where traditional patrilineal communities retracted into smaller family units during times of economic hardship. The stratification of power within some CBT Kyrgyzstan groups suggests a "top-down" establishment approach (Butcher 2008; Zapata et al. 2011), neglecting traditional community concepts. Yet, as Mauren Reed (1997) argued, if developers would find existing power structures within a community, efforts to redistribute that power would almost certainly meet resistance.

In Kyrgyzstan, multi-ethnic community considerations are crucial, especially given the country's historical ethnic tensions. Southern regions with significant Uzbek and Tajik populations reflect some recognition of ethnic diversity in tourism. For instance, GIZ's project in Jalal-Abad considers the local Uzbek population,¹¹⁸ and initiatives like "Dinner with a Dunghan family" in Karakol highlight the consideration of cultural diversity when developing tourism products (Destination Karakol 2023). However, the adequacy of these representations is questionable and depends heavily on guides acting as cultural ambassadors (Salazar 2012a).

¹¹⁷ Jekatarina Rudolph (GIZ development worker), interview with the author, translated from German, Bishkek office, October 2023.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Additionally, further inquiry is needed into the power dynamics of local specialists, such as KATO and KCBTA, which are almost exclusively relied on by development projects to conduct training.

Thus, these organizations have a significant influence on tourism development in Kyrgyzstan. However, the equality of access to them and the quality of their training, especially concerning cultural adequacy, remain uncertain. Particularly, the aspect of guide training, which Mirbek critiqued for presenting an overly Russian view of history,¹¹⁹ warrants further examination (see also Salazar 2012b). Although CBT employs a decentralized approach, most agencies booking local CBT guesthouses are based in the capital Bishkek. CBT fails to address the significant power imbalance between urban and rural areas, as only a fraction of rural homestays is booked directly through CBT. Thus, CBT's premise of creating communities resilient to outside exploitation and dependency remains limited.

As the term “community development” itself states, development projects do indeed create communities (DeYoung, Zholdoshalieva, and Zholdoshalieva 2013). However, community as a concept, being rather empty or “slippery” (Amit and Rapport 2002) needs to be filled with meaning, since it can have both inclusive and exclusive connotations and must not be carelessly employed in a purely positive sense. Community is an affectively charged and normative term that is unable to summarize the complex nature of contested politics and identities. Community requires constant effort and re-affirmation to function; it is not a static category of fixed identities but rather a fluid field of constant renegotiation.

¹¹⁹ Mirbek (Independent tour guide), interview with the author, Bishkek café, November 2023.

Finally, is financial viability the paramount sign of CBT's success, as Zapata et al. (2011) argue, or does CBT only distinguish itself from conventional tourism by having a "consistent effect on the configuration of community," as Ruiz-Ballesteros (2023, 2675) suggests? I contend that both aspects are essential and interconnected. The reciprocal nature of fully empowered CBT communities can enhance economic viability. The goal is to balance reciprocity and exchange by fostering internal reciprocal relations while maintaining profitable external exchanges (ibid., 2667). Success varies among CBT groups in Kyrgyzstan. Negative examples include coordinators abusing power and some homestays receiving more benefits due to location, causing disparities. These cases illustrate struggles against power dynamics and market-driven individualism, which undermine reciprocity. This conflict leads to the next section—the study of values and their transmission through development projects.

Values in Community-Based Tourism Development

Ruiz-Ballesteros argues that CBT, due to its focus on community empowerment, "must necessarily interconnect market rationality (exchange and economic benefit) with community logic (reciprocity and equity)" (Usmonova, Alieva, and León 2022). In other words, CBT needs to balance economic and extra-economic values. This chapter examines *values* as one of the underlying premises of CBT Kyrgyzstan, whose website headline "Our Values" describes CBT as "the practice of providing natural, *value*-packed travel services," stating that it is "an excellent *value* and travel experience" (CBT Kyrgyzstan n.d., emphasis added).¹²⁰ While the term

¹²⁰ Additionally, they list the following under "values:" "CBT relies on participation of local stakeholders; CBT has to contribute to the local economic development through increasing tourism revenues; CBT has to develop socially and economically sustainable tourism" (CBT Kyrgyzstan, n.d.)

“excellent value” emphasizes CBT’s substantial benefits relative to its cost, “value-packed” suggests an “ethical tourism” experience. Thus, this official document incorporates the double meaning of value. The title of the paper “Creating Value for All” (Baktygulov, Raeva, and Kraemer 2010), studying the development of CBT Kyrgyzstan, echoes the discussion of values, highlighting the creation of both economic value through poverty alleviation and social values within the community. Additionally, the Kyrgyz government’s tourism fund addresses ethics and “marketing with values” (TDSF, n.d.).

For this analysis, I grouped my findings regarding extra-economic values promoted by CBT or transmitted through Kyrgyzstan’s tourism development into social, cultural, and environmental values to make discussions more precise. I consider the creation of a participatory community and female empowerment to be *social values*. Having already discussed how CBT often falls short of creating more than a functional community, in theory, tourism development is an effective tool for transmitting social values. The value of gender empowerment can be seen to be partly successful. While the implications for a broader political change in Kyrgyzstan, where hegemonic masculinity legitimizes gender hierarchy (Müller 2022), remain unclear, many tourism projects aimed at women have had tangible effects (see Yousafzai et al. 2023). The case of Begayim and her mother-in-law opening a guesthouse shows that while this is no easy way out of poverty, it presents one of the few opportunities for widowed or single women in rural areas to make a living and work towards a better future for themselves and their children.

Strengthening *cultural values* through tourism development, mostly in the form of reviving traditions like yurt and shyrdak making, dances, dresses, eagle hunting, and sports, was a common positive response from my interlocutors regarding the benefits of tourism in Kyrgyzstan. Asel explained that donors do not always develop cultural projects specifically for

tourism, but tour companies often seize the opportunity.¹²¹ However, the World Nomad Games exemplify how promoting nomadic culture through the “invention of tradition” can also foster rising ethno-nationalism (Sheranova 2021). If development projects accept nationalist tropes of traditionalization to secure financial and government support, they risk promoting existing injustices and homogenizing a diverse population (Beyer and Finke 2019, 311). Moreover, the uncritical celebration of cultural values further entrenches Kyrgyzstan’s niche within a global hegemony of nationalism, relying on “cultural particularity and shared essence” instead of “citizenship or a social contract” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 118). In the context of tourism, promoting traditions uncritically may lead to reinforcing stereotypes and the hosts merely “performing” for tourists instead of having an egalitarian relationship.

The consideration of how *environmental values* have become ubiquitous in tourism development was what initially led me to introduce theorizing about values. The promotion of sustainability under the paradigm of “green growth” is widespread in Kyrgyzstan, influenced by the UN’s sustainable development goals (UNWTO, n.d.-b). However, sustainable development is not without its contradictions (Kopnina 2013), with most projects focusing on growth through marketing rather than addressing major environmental issues (Pan et al. 2018, 457–458). This is not surprising, as sustainable development mainly prioritizes conservation efforts when immediate and easily identifiable economic benefits can be observed (Fennell 2006, 168). Denis, who works for GIZ, told me that sustainability is still a novel concept in Kyrgyzstan, jokingly referring to it as “green brainwashing.”¹²² This is a clear example of values

¹²¹ Asel Ismailova (Director of Kyrgyz Guided Tours company), interview with the author, Bishkek office, September 2023.

¹²² Denis Krasnozhonov (Senior advisor at GIZ), interview with the author, Bishkek office, November 2023.

transferred through tourism development. As Jamal and Camargo (2014, 23) state, “values and virtues do strongly influence developmental and tourism organization policies.” However, most projects emphasize securing “Green Labels” for homestays to attract environment-conscious European consumers, instead of tackling infrastructural problems.¹²³

This three-fold categorization of CBT’s claimed extra-economic values, which partly remain implicit in official statements, is not absolute. However, making these values explicit may help analyze their alignment with the influence of neoliberal policies and practices on tourism development. I broadly define these as the emphasis on individual entrepreneurs, free markets, trade, and a weak role of the state (Harvey 2005, 2; Ferguson 2010, 170). Regarding sustainability, the focus on green labels and marketing keeps growth as the ultimate goal of much green tourism development (Hall 2015). Ecotourism activities that “neoliberalize nature” turn parts of ecosystems into consumable commodities (Duffy 2015, 539). Similarly, cultures and communities are increasingly commodified (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Concerning social values, neoliberalism emphasizes entrepreneurship, which necessitates competitiveness (Reid 2015) and, as shown before, may contradict community values.

My study is the first to discuss the increasing focus on individual entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan’s tourism development (see Chapter 7) and their relationship to the established CBT network, as well as the conflicts that may arise between them (see the vignette “The Exclusivity of Community”). Byung-Chul Han notes that “neoliberalism transforms workers into entrepreneurs” (Han 2017, 5). These independent rural tourism providers increasingly rely on online booking platforms, paying fees to international corporations without receiving

¹²³ Samuel Mara (CEO of Nomad's Land travel company), interview with the author, online, December 2023.

immediate benefits, creating dependence on these platforms—even if the hosts employ strategies against exploitation and should not be seen as “passive.” This upsurge in independent guesthouses is also due to the increase in donor-funded education and training. While needing further study, I argue that these workshops and classes, essential to development projects, are shifting to promote individual entrepreneurs over community businesses, with education seen as a means-to-an-end or an economic good (Graeber 2013, 234), emphasizing global competitiveness, profit, and discipline (Ayikoru, Tribe, and Airey 2009, 196). Having addressed the influence of neoliberal policies and practices on community-based tourism development, the next section will expand on this by examining dependency and whether CBT achieves its goal of empowering locals.

Dependency and Neoliberal Responsibility

Anthropological studies on the emergence of value, see it as embedded within socially constructed hierarchies of information (Souleles, Archer, and Thaning 2023, 163), aligning with Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, where the value of a commodity is socially agreed upon rather than inherent (Marx [1887] 1990). As I have thus far argued, in CBT, the valuation of its tourism product is based not on the labor power required but on the social, cultural, and environmental values underlying its production. This section explores the dependencies arising from CBT’s reliance on these values, and relates how responsibility is shifted to the consumers—the mostly Western tourists. The “ethicalization” of tourism, growing since the 1990s (Castañeda 2012), reflects a global trend of ethical consumerism (Sin 2017, 2). I argue that this shift to the responsibility of the individual consumer can be seen as a “neoliberal value.”

This trend doesn't address the necessity of consumption itself (Hickel 2020) nor seriously consider regulation, which nowadays exists in the form of multi-level governance (Mosedale 2016). West and Carrier describe "ecotourism as the institutional expression of particular sets of late capitalist values in a particular political-economic climate," stressing "the community" and "civil society" over state agencies (West and Carrier 2004, 484). Following Bourdieu ([1984] 2002), culture is intertwined with economics, and consumer habits relate to class. Individuals often follow their community's habits, perpetuating structural injustices (Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo 2009, 8-9). The "responsible tourist" typically comes from the intellectual class, guided by principles of preserving cultures and the environment, in line with romanticism (Urry and Larsen 2011, 107; Lane 2009, 354).

Responsibility can be seen as normative ideas about practices, which are then rated to determine their responsibility (Sin 2017, 3). Usmonova et al. (2022) found that CBT tourists are concerned about sustainability and social justice, creating a cognitive bias where higher interest in sustainability correlates with increased perceptions thereof. Crucially, tourists want to experience the "difference" of ethical tourism like CBT (ibid. 10). Coming back to "pro-poor" tourism, it is firmly embedded in a neoliberal system, accepting the status quo and recreating the dependency of hosts on benevolent tourists (Harrison 2008). Its ethical and ontological presuppositions thus naturalize global north-south power differences, giving tourists the privilege of contributing to alleviation. This aligns with a Western/Eurocentric development paradigm (Escobar 1991).

Contrary to this, Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012) argue that community-based tourism initially meant to counteract this dependency, but has in many cases been coopted by neoliberalism. They suggest a spectrum from "fully owned and controlled" CBT achieving self-reliance, to

Community-Based Partnership Tourism (CBPT), where hosts are “partners” rather than owners, to “Community Tourism” (CT), a form of private investment where multinational corporations own local resources (ibid., 36-7). They link this to three development paradigms: neoliberalism, dependency, and alternative development (Telfer 2009). I don’t see the need to further divide CBT into minute categories, as Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012) propose, nor is it within the scope of this thesis to determine if CBT has been co-opted by neoliberalism. What is relevant is assessing the state of empowerment CBT Kyrgyzstan achieves and how it relates to dependency (see also Fennell 2006, 130). My research, lacking long-term participant observation within CBT locations, did not produce a definite answer here.

However, it can be said that, while CBT Kyrgyzstan creates jobs, achieving poverty alleviation and local ownership to some degree, it remains dependent on external donors for program development and investments,¹²⁴ which in turn dictate its further evolution. It can only be seen as a partial success, as true empowerment and independent decision-making are not fully realized. Scrutinizing the relationship between global capital and local sovereignty (Sharpley and Telfer 2008), it is doubtful whether the hosts, “those who are intended to benefit—at least according to the rhetoric—have gained nearly as much as those promoting tourism through corporate globalization” (Reid 2015, 2). Against the neoliberal dominance of private capital, some suggest holding the nation-state responsible for facilitating empowerment through laws and rights (Giampiccolo and Mtapuri 2012, 40). However, in Kyrgyzstan, the state has been slow to recognize community-based tourism development opportunities and is often seen by locals as a hindrance to empowerment.

¹²⁴ Asylbek Rajiev (Director of KCBTA), interview with the author, KCBTA office in Bishkek, October 2023.

Another aspect in which rural tourism and CBT may create dependencies is the increasing trend in cultural tourism, which relies on offering a unique and “authentic” product. Usmonova et al. (2022) showed that tourists were disappointed by the lack of involvement in “traditional daily activities” (ibid., 15). This is reflected in the example of Mirbek in Chapter 8, who brings tourists to yurt-homestays not specializing in tourism because tourists rate this experience as more authentic. Having explored the tourists’ romantic ideas and values about Kyrgyz nomadic society through the concepts of “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar 2012b) and Urry’s (1990) “tourist gaze,” I argue that while this trend in cultural tourism also creates a higher appreciation of Kyrgyzstan’s culture among Kyrgyz people themselves, it is still influenced by Western recognition (see Pelkmans 2022a). I do not see this as causing a “cultural loss,” as Greenwood (1989) suggested, but it is critical to not replicate into orientalist tropes.

However, following Cohen’s (1988b) “emergent authenticity,” I contend that if CBT truly achieves empowerment, this allows for unmediated interactions beyond stereotypes between hosts and tourists, provided that guides and tourism agencies do not overrule them. It is also important not to overstate the influence of individual tourists, who can become “targets” of power, as “[b]y definition, they are found on unfamiliar political and cultural turf, and they often communicate at a distinct linguistic disadvantage” (Cheong and Miller, 2000, 380). Hosts and guides, on the other hand, may “behave as agents in power relations by galvanizing (active or passive) resistance to tourists, or endorsing tourism” (ibid., 382). Thus, even if empowerment is not fully realized, it is important to see hosts as active participants, using traditional notions of hospitality for their own gain (see Chapter 8) or devising tactics against the exploitation of digital booking platforms (see Chapter 7).

CBT Naryn, the main field site of my research, shows both promises and challenges. As tourism in Naryn is experiencing exponential growth post-COVID-19 (see table f.), hotspots like Kel Suu face problems of overtourism, causing both environmental concerns and unequal distribution of earnings that weaken the overall cohesion of the CBT group. Gulira, the repeatedly re-elected coordinator, lamented the past when CBT focused more on community strength and sustainability values.¹²⁵ She noted that while CBT members were once integrated into the community, many are now motivated by profit, highlighting the need for education that is not primarily profit-focused. Lastly, despite my many critiques of rural tourism and CBT, I want to emphasize that CBT workers like Gulira, tourism entrepreneurs like Ayganash, Begayim, and Ilimkazy, as well as guides like Mirbek,¹²⁶ are actively taking responsibility across social, cultural, and sustainable dimensions.

My interlocutors have been invaluable in writing this thesis, offering me their honest concerns and opinions. It is important to me to not portray them as passive victims of the influence of globalization and neoliberalism. Rather, I have aimed to highlight some of the contradictions inherent in the CBT concept, hoping for a better understanding of the challenges facing this sector. And, while the impact of rural community-based tourism on the lives of most Kyrgyz people should also not be overestimated, as it is still small in numbers compared to the mass tourism of mostly regional and domestic tourists centered on Lake Issyk-Kul, I believe that despite its failings, it has the potential for positively changing the lives of locals.

¹²⁵ Gulira Kenjekaraeva (Coordinator of CBT Naryn), interview with the author, Silk Road Guesthouse Bishkek, September 2023.

¹²⁶ See table c) in the Appendix for details.

Final Summary and Implications for Future Research

This thesis critically examined the concept of *community* in Kyrgyzstan's tourism development. In rural tourism and CBT, community becomes more "functional," emphasizing collective action over mutual aid. Integrating market rationality with community logic is an essential challenge. True community empowerment in CBT requires understanding existing power relations and mechanisms to distribute power. A top-down approach neglecting traditional community concepts may lead individual CBTs to turn into "family businesses." In multi-ethnic regions, tourism development acknowledges cultural diversity but often relies heavily on guides as cultural ambassadors. Local specialists like KATO hold significant influence, but access to training is unequal and sometimes promotes cultural stereotypes.

CBT's approach fails to fully address urban-rural power imbalances, limiting community resilience. CBT Kyrgyzstan claims to be based on social, cultural, and environmental *values*, yet these can be seen to conflict with neoliberal policies emphasizing individual entrepreneurship, free markets, and a diminished state role, as well as commoditizing nature and culture into prioritizing growth over sustainability. Education transmits neoliberal values, emphasizing global competitiveness over sustainability. The rise of independent entrepreneurs relying on online booking platforms furthers dependence on international corporations. These entrepreneurs often view CBT as self-serving rather than supportive of the wider network of tourism workers, creating tensions between them.

Despite CBT's intent to counteract global injustices, it often perpetuates dependence on benevolent tourists and multinational corporations, failing to achieve true empowerment and independent decision-making. Tourists' desire for "authentic" experiences may lead hosts to conform to Western imaginaries. Still, rural tourism in Kyrgyzstan can enhance local cultural

appreciation, albeit through a Western lens. CBT Naryn, the main field site of this thesis, illustrates both promise and challenges, with issues like unequal profit distribution, competition from independent guesthouses, and overtourism weakening group cohesion. While this research has limitations, like lacking long-term participant observation, it provides valuable insights into the complex power dynamics of community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. Future research should critically scrutinize how community is defined and applied in CBT. It is essential to investigate whether this notion fosters inclusivity or perpetuates existing power hierarchies. Understanding how stakeholders interpret and implement the concept will uncover dynamics shaping tourism development. This thesis highlights the importance of examining the multifaceted meanings of value in tourism development. Future studies should analyze how values introduced by development projects align with or diverge from local contexts. The contradictions in the neoliberal presuppositions underlying CBT, which expect local communities to self-manage and achieve sustainability within a global market, need thorough examination.

Education and training are crucial areas for research, as they reveal how neoliberal influences manifest. Researchers should explore how global economic pressures shape local tourism practices and assess whether CBT truly empowers communities without creating dependencies. Long-term sustainability and the actual impact of CBT on community empowerment should be investigated to determine if initiatives lead to genuine community control and equitable development or primarily serve external interests. Comparative studies across different regions and cultural contexts can provide insights into the effectiveness and challenges of CBT, identifying best practices and common pitfalls for more effective tourism development strategies.

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Appendix

Tables d.) and e.) have been reproduced by friendly permission of Asylbek Rajiev, director of KCBTA and table f.) by friendly permission of Omar Morales Lopez, working for the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) in Naryn. All other tables and figures have been produced by the author.

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Table a.) List of Abbreviations

AKDN: Aga Khan Development Network

CBT: Community-based tourism

DOT: Department of Tourism under the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sport and Youth

Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic

GIZ: German Agency for International Cooperation

JICA: Japan International Cooperation Agency

KNSC: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

KOICA: Korean International Cooperation Agency

NURP: Naryn Urban Resilience Project

PRC: People's Republic of China

SDC: Swiss Development Cooperation

TDSF: Tourism Development Support Fund in the Kyrgyz Republic

UCA: University of Central Asia

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

[Table b.\) Glossary of Kyrgyz words](#)

Jailoo: High Mountain Meadow

Kymyz: Drink made from fermented mare's milk

Manas: Kyrgyz National Hero of the 9th century and Epos of the same name

Toi: Life-Cycle Rituals in Kyrgyzstan, often connected with gift-giving

Uruk: Clan

Uruu: Tribe

Table c.) List of interviews

<u>Type</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Organization</u>	<u>Date</u>
Development project	Surekha Ghogale	Project Manager	NURP	14.09.2023
Tour company/ Guide	Asel Ismailova and Ilyaz Zamanov	Director and Tour Guide	Kyrgyz Guided Tours	20.09.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Gulira Kenjekaraeva	Coordinator	CBT Naryn	29.09.2023
Development project	Sanghun Choo	CEO	Kyrgyz Friends	05.10.2023
Tourism education	Damira and Gulzat	Professors	Naryn State University NGU	06.10.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Jamal	Office worker	CBT Naryn	06.10.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Jama and Gulum	Office workers	CBT Naryn	07.10.2023
Development project	Nargiza Kudaiberdieva	Project Manager	Helvetas	18.10.2023
Tourism association	Asylbek Rajiev	Director	KCBTA	23.10.2023
Development projects	Jekatarina Rudolph	Development worker	GIZ	31.10.2023
Tourism education	Nurbek Nisharapov	Country Head	SPCE	03.11.2023
Tour company	Sergej	Deputy Director	Novinomad	03.11.2023
Development projects	Zhyldyz Nurlanbek	Project Assistant	JICA	09.11.2023
Tour guide	Mirbek	Tour Guide	Independent guide	09.11.2023

Development project	Denis Krasnozhonov	Senior Advisor	GIZ	10.11.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Bek and Chyngyz	Coordinator and Tour Guide	CBT Kochkor	12.11.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Ayganash	Guesthouse owner	Naryn guesthouse	14.11.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Begayim	Guesthouse owner	Tenir Too guesthouse	14.11.2023
Tourism worker(s)	Ilimkazy	Guesthouse owner	Naryn guesthouse	14.11.2023
Tour company	Samuel Mara	CEO	Nomad's Land	03.12.2023

Table d.): Income earned by CBT members from 2014 to 2019

#	Organization	Income, KGS				Difference, %
		2014	2015	2016	2019	
1	CBT Kochkor	4'226'970	4'597'200	6'604'300	7'279'000	
2	CBT Naryn	479'450	600'000	830'000	2'000'000	
3	CBT Jalalabat	270'320	309'680	366'338	362'400	
4	CBT Arstanbap	3'715'920	4'251'205	4'697'140	4'381'450	
5	CBT Kara-Suu	1'248'440	1'626'161	1'896'342	3'014'540	
6	CBT Karakol	2'518'880	2'020'455	1'958'120	5'025'000	
7	CBT Kazarman	140'280	199'000	501'900	2'000'350	
8	CBT Talas	184'000	348'500	390'600	675'200	
9	CBT Osh/CBT Alay	1'204'100	875'635	632'059	14'152'943	
10	CBT Tamchy	190'905	115'000	n/a	53'000	

11	CBT Bokonbaevo	2'049'632	1'235'226	2'329'290	4'219'401	
12	CBT Kyzyl-Oi	1'139'500	1'156'000	1'067'000	3'822'902	
13	CBT Chong-Kemin	964'000	1'304'645	2'094'900	1'820'000	
14	CBT Alay (merged with Osh)	680'000	446'000	818'540		
15	CBT Sary-Mogol	683'712	1'172'244	1'315'630	3'538'000	
	TOTAL	19'696'109	20'256'951	25'502'159	52'344'186	+ 105.2 %

Table e.): Number of tourists served by CBT groups in 2019

#	Organization	Number of tourists				
		2014	2015	2016	2019	Difference, %
1	CBT Kochkor	3'500	1128	1'545	3'000	
2	CBT Naryn	832	425	n/a	1'200	
3	CBT Jalalabat	318	300	372	272	
4	CBT Arstanbap	2347	2650	2'841	2'747	
5	CBT Kara-Suu	379	385	426	508	
6	CBT Karakol	480	870	630	1'107	
7	CBT Kazarman	241	252	601	1'230	
8	CBT Talas	61	348	436	750	
9	CBT Osh/ CBT Alay	974	876	763	3'550	
10	CBT Tamchy	287	115	399	725	

11	CBT Bokonbaevo	1'947	1125	2'014	3'720	
12	CBT Kyzyl-Oi	1'270	943	1'138	2'165	
13	CBT Chong-Kemin	802	950	1'800	1'050	
14	CBT Alay	178	215	741		
15	CBT Sary-Mogol	467	810	1'100	1'800	
	TOTAL	14'083	11'277	14'806	20'824	+ 40.6 %

Table f): Increase in tourist count and revenue in Naryn Oblast over 5 Years

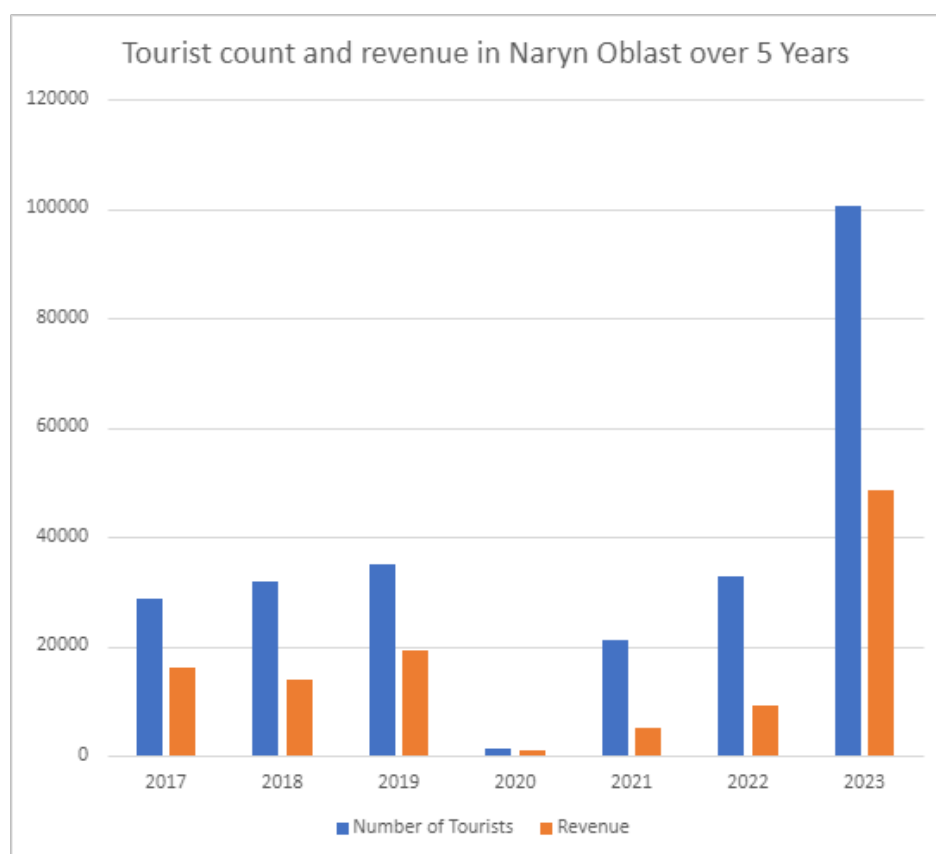


Table g.): List of tourism development projects that I interacted with

Name of Project	Organization & Funding	Mainly tourism?	Dates	Purpose/ Thematic Focus	Interviewed?
Integrated Rural Development Program	GIZ / BMZ & EU	No	2018-2024	Rural Development	Yes
Green Economy and Sustainable Private Sector Development in Kyrgyzstan	GIZ	No	2020-2023	Green Economy Private Sector Development	Yes
Green Tour: Sustainable Tourism in Kyrgyzstan	Helvetas / EU's SWITCH Asia program	Yes	2020-2024	Private Sector Development Climate & Disaster Resilience	Yes
Sustainable Winter Tourism Development Project	Helvetas / Swiss Government (SECO)	Yes	2021-2025	Private Sector Development	No; received documents
Master Plan Project for Regional Development and Tourism Promotions through Utilization of World Heritage Sites in Chui region	JICA	Yes	2021-2026	Private Sector Development	Yes
Naryn Urban Resilience Project (NURP)	AKDN / Swiss Government (SECO)	No	2021-2027	Institutional Strengthening (Governance) Climate & Disaster Resilience	Yes
Aid for Trade in Central Asia	UNDP	No	2018-2022	Private Sector Development	Yes
Business Growth Initiative	USAID	No	2014-2018	Private Sector Development	No; received documents
Kyrgyz Friends/ Inclusive Business Solution Project	KOICA	Yes	2019-2023	Private Sector Development	Yes
Silk Road CBT initiative: Connecting Central Asian Community-Based Tourism and European Markets	ACTED / EU Central Asia Invest Program	Yes	2020-2023	Private Sector Development (Competitiveness)	No; received documents
Sustainable Energy for Tourism (SET)	ACTED / EU SWITCH Asia Program	Yes	2020-2023	Green Economy	No; received documents

Table h.) Questions of my online survey to tourists visiting Kyrgyzstan

1. General information about your person

For statistical reasons only, will not be used to identify you in any way.

What is your nationality?

How old are you?

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

High school

Trade school

Bachelor degree

Master degree

PhD or higher

Currently enrolled in University

Other...

What was your budget for the trip? (Not including the flight)

Less than 500\$

500-1000\$

1000-2000\$

Other...

2. General information about the trip to Kyrgyzstan

Please indicate your experience with Kyrgyzstan:

First-time visitor to Kyrgyzstan

Have visited Kyrgyzstan before

First time in Kyrgyzstan, but not first time in Central Asia

Other...

Where did you first get to know about Kyrgyzstan?

Friends or Family

Media (a film, book, blog article...)

Official tourism representatives

Other...

How long was your stay in Kyrgyzstan?

What was the main purpose of your trip to Kyrgyzstan?

See a different culture

Nature activities like hiking and horseriding

Beach holiday (Issyk-Kul)

Research and education

Business

Other...

Which of these cities did you visit?

Bishkek

Osh

Karakol

Naryn

Other...

Which of these well-known touristic sites did you visit?

Issyk-Kul

Kel-Suu

Son-Kul

Tash-Rabat

Other...

Was your trip self-organized, or did you take part in a tour?

Self-organized

Tour

Both

Where did you get your information from? For example, where to travel, what to do, etc.?

Friends or Family

Official tourism websites of the Kyrgyz Republic or Kyrgyz tourism companies

Internet blogs or forums

Travel books or brochures

Locals

Guides

Other...

What type of tourism services or products did you pay for?

Souvenirs and local crafts

Dance, music or other traditional performances

Cooking shows

Guided treks (including horsetreks)

Translator

Car rental

Other...

Where did you stay?

Hotels

Hostels

Guesthouses and homestays with locals

Yurts

Tents

Other...

Please indicate the tourism organizations in Kyrgyzstan that you are familiar with

CBT (community-based tourism)

Hospitality Kyrgyzstan

Destination Kyrgyzstan (or Destination Karakol, Naryn, Jalal-Abad etc.)

If you took part in any performance (dance, music, other type of show), would you say they are authentic?

Authentic

Inauthentic

Doesn't matter

Open-ended questions

Write as much as you want.

Picking up from the last question; how important is experiencing an authentic culture to you?
Can you recall an experience that you would describe as “authentic” or “inauthentic”? What

were your expectations before you came to Kyrgyzstan? What were you most looking forward to? And were these expectations fulfilled?

Can you share your experiences with the locals during your trip? What were your interactions like, and what factors contributed to your overall impression? Did you experience particular challenging or positive moments you would like to share?

Do you think tourism is a good business for Kyrgyz people? Do you think the shares are evenly distributed?

Do you know the term “ecotourism”? If so, could you briefly describe it? Do you think Kyrgyzstan is a good destination for ecotourism and environmentally sustainable tourism?

Do you know the term “community-based tourism” (CBT) and what does it mean? Have you stayed in CBT guesthouses or did you go to CBT for their services? How was the experience?

What would you do different on your next trip to Kyrgyzstan?

If you could give “feedback” to Kyrgyz tourism providers generally, what would it be? In other words, what recommendations or suggestions for changes in the Kyrgyz tourism industry do you have?

Is there some feedback you would like to give about this questionnaire?

Ländlicher und gemeindebasierter Tourismus (CBT) basiert auf den Idealen von Empowerment und Partizipation und zielt darauf ab, die lokale Entwicklung durch Engagement und Selbstverwaltung der Gemeinschaften zu fördern. In Kirgisistan, einem gebirgigen Land in Zentralasien mit begrenzten traditionellen Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten, wurde im Jahr 2000 von der Schweizer Entwicklungs-NGO Helvetas ein CBT-Netzwerk eingerichtet, um alternative Einkommensquellen in ländlichen Gebieten zu schaffen. Im Rahmen dieser Studie wurden während eines dreimonatigen Aufenthalts halbstrukturierte Interviews und teilnehmende Beobachtung durchgeführt, um Daten zu sammeln, die sich auf die Interaktionen zwischen lokalen Gemeinschaften, Entwicklungsorganisationen und dem globalen Tourismusmarkt konzentrieren. Die Studie schließt eine Forschungslücke beim Verständnis der soziokulturellen Auswirkungen des ländlichen und gemeindebasierten Tourismus in den letzten Jahren, indem sie dessen Entwicklung verfolgt und die Annahmen des CBT hinterfragt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der CBT zwar zur Schaffung von Arbeitsplätzen in ländlichen Gebieten beiträgt, seine Einnahmen aber nicht gleichmäßig verteilt und dadurch interne Machtungleichgewichte verstärkt werden. Das Aufkommen unabhängiger Gästehäuser außerhalb des CBT-Netzes, angetrieben durch digitale Technologien und von Gebern finanzierte Schulungen, verschärft den Wettbewerb weiter. CBT und ländlicher Tourismus haben das Potenzial zum Empowerment der Gastgeber, doch ist dies eng mit der Abhängigkeit von globalem Kapital und Entwicklungsprojekte beeinflussenden Trends verbunden, wie etwa „grünes Wachstum.“ Zu dieser Abhängigkeit gehört auch die Erfüllung der Erwartungen westlicher Touristen, die auf romantischen Vorstellungen beruhen. Diese Arbeit plädiert für eine nuancierte nuanciertes Verständnis und die Anwendung des Konzepts der *community* sowie für den Nutzen der Untersuchung von *Werten* im Kontext der Tourismusentwicklung. Sie diskutiert auch

Machtverhältnisse und die Schwächen und Grenzen des gemeinschaftsbasierenden Tourismus, insbesondere im Kontext des Übergangs Kirgisistans vom Sozialismus zum neoliberalen Kapitalismus.