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## The Kyrgyz horse: Enactments and agencies in and beyond a tourism context

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### **Abstract:**

The horse has a strong cultural and historical importance in Kyrgyzstan. With a mountainous topography, the rural areas of this Central Asian country are best accessed by horse. Among all the tourism experiences Kyrgyzstan can offer, horse trekking has become one of the most popular. The article discusses horse-human relations in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The article will show how the Kyrgyz horse is enacted in multiple discourses and practices related to tourism, some of which converge, while others are in conflict. The article is supported by a political ecology approach, holding that nature is socially and politically constructed, as well as ANT/post-humanism approaches to tourism studies, which bring attention to non-human agency. We find that the multiple enactments of the Kyrgyz horse, *the brand, the battle horse, the breed, the beshbarmak, and the best friend*, derive from the horse's multiple agencies, which give the horse its important position in Kyrgyz culture and society. However, the branding of the Kyrgyz horse as a "unique" selling point in tourism development fails to acknowledge the complex human-animal relation by down-playing horse husbandry practices that are in conflict with tourism.

**Keywords:** horse tourism; political ecology, post-humanism; human-animal relations, Kyrgyzstan

## **Introduction**

The former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan is located in Central Asia and has a predominantly mountainous topography with an average altitude of 2988 metres above sea level (CIA, n.d). After independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan was eager to develop its domestic market economy. Heavily supported by foreign aid organizations, the former Soviet republic country was soon promoted as an up-and-coming tourist destination for adventure, nature, and eco-tourism (Allen, 2009; Palmer, 2006). Tourism is today considered as a major driver of development in the Central Asian region (World Bank, 2017). The recorded number of visitors to Kyrgyzstan for the year 2017 was 1,3 million, which is more than double from 2001 (when official collection of visitor statistics began) and tourism accounted for 4,8% of the GDP in 2017, compared to 3,5 % in 2006 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2018).

The horse has a strong cultural and historical importance in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz people are known for their nomadic lifestyle and taking into consideration the topography, most rural areas are best accessed by horse (or on foot). This is why horse trekking and nomadic lifestyle are frequently promoted in tourism as the most authentic way of experiencing Kyrgyzstan (Reid, 2013). Although there are no official statistics about the number of tourists who visit the country for horse tourism, both the promotional material and the number of tourist companies offering this activity indicate that this is an important niche in the Kyrgyz tourism market, especially among tourists from Europe, USA and Japan (Jenish, 2017).

For the purpose of this research, we adopt the definition of horse tourism used by Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir (2008, p.106) "Horse-based tourism ranges from races and shows where the tourist is passive to active recreation where the tourist is a rider,

travelling by horse on longer tours or shorter rides, it can be urban or rural, adventurous or sedentary”. Helgadóttir’s (2006, p. 536) writing on the nature of horse tourism argues that horse-based tourism as an experience can refer to “a rich cultural and historical heritage tinged with the nostalgia of the romantic past”.

This article discusses horse-human relations in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and sets off to show how the Kyrgyz horse is enacted in various discourses and practices related to tourism, some of which converge, while others are in conflict. The article draws upon recent tourism research within political ecology, holding that nature is socially and politically constructed (Mostafanezhad, Norum, Shelton & Thompson-Carr 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016) as well as ANT/post-humanism approaches to tourism studies that bring attention to non-human actors (Jóhannesson, 2005; Ren, 2011; van der Duim, Ren & Jóhannesson, 2017). While most previous research related to tourism and animals tends to focus on wild animals (Markwell, 2015), domesticated animals, such as the horse, have enjoyed less attention within tourism studies (Evans, Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015; Helgadóttir, 2006). In relation to the above, the aims for this article are: First, to bring insight into human-horse relations beyond a Western context, and in a geographical area where few such studies have been carried out. Secondly, to study the horse as a non-human actor and how it is not only enacted, but also enacts itself in multiple discourses and practices related to tourism. In other words, we will look at how the horse is shaped by discourses and practices, but also itself contributing to shaping the very same discourses and practices. The latter indicates a form of non-human agency, which we here understand as an actor’s ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors (Ren 2011). A subsequent aim of the article is to contribute to a wider literature on how tourism affects, alters and changes nature/society relations (see for example Adams & Hutton, 2007; Duffy 2008; Fletcher, 2014; Mathis & Rose, 2016; West & Carrier, 2004).

We draw upon various sources of empirical material: 1) Official statistics on the horse and tourism sectors in Kyrgyzstan, 2) marketing and promotional materials for horse tourism in Kyrgyzstan, 3) participant observation and 4) 14 semi-structured interviews with horse tourism entrepreneurs, local inhabitants, a tour operator, a Kyrgyz environmental NGO, and tourists in different regions of north-eastern Kyrgyzstan. The interviews were conducted in three separate field trips to Kyrgyzstan, one by authors two and three in August 2015 and two by author one in June 2016 and from April-June 2017. Eight of the interviews were in English with Kyrgyz interpretation where needed, while six interviews were carried out in Russian. Participant observation was carried out on four different day trips with horse tourism companies in August 2015, May 2017 and June 2017. These guided day trips were carried out both together with other Western tourists, as well as privately.

In the following section, we will give a brief overview of the status of tourism and horse-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan, before presenting some of the previous research on horse-human relations in tourism studies and introducing the analytical approach that will guide our study.

### **Studying horse-human relations**

Horse-human relations have changed dramatically with industrialization. As motorized vehicles became common and an infrastructure for them spread in large parts of the world, horses as a means of transport became redundant (DeMello, 2012). While draft horses and workhorses are still declining in numbers, breeds that have a role in recreation have gained a stronger position, in what Evans and Vial (2015) have called “the new equine economy”. In this latter context, the cultural and social value of horses relates to economic value in new ways (Evans & Vial, 2015). Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir’s (2015) study, for example, shows how the Icelandic horse has gained a new economic role as a riding

horse with as a worldwide status and popularity. This tendency suggests that socio-cultural and economic processes might lead to new ways of thinking and interacting with an animal and it calls for a perspective that draws the link between politics and non-humans.

Within tourism studies, a growing body of research has recently explored the link between nature and politics, inspired by the field of political ecology (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016). In addition to the acknowledgement that tourism is a powerful industry that causes physical changes to nature and landscape, these studies also agree that politics and sociocultural understandings influence the way nature “ought” to look in order to attract tourists. Studies have also found that politics and sociocultural factors also influence our understandings of animals and that “some animals are clearly more attractive than others” among tourists (Tremblay, 2002; Curtin, 2005). As such, attention is brought to how perceptions of attractiveness might spread across cultures, interplay and co-produce reality through discursive practices related to social construction and production of nature (Nepal & Saarinen, 2016). Needless to say, this process might lead to a “clash” between various perceptions and practices. This is clearly illustrated in the study of hunting tourism in Kyrgyzstan (Nordbø et al., 2018). The study illustrates a conflict between inhabitants in the At-Bashy region and tour operators using the nature in their region for trophy hunting for international tourists, without including the local population in the decision processes. The conflict also involves the national and regional authorities granting licences to such activities. Roderick Neuman’s (2002) study *“Imposing Wilderness”* on National Parks in Africa is another illustration of this. Neuman describes the conflict of park management, European tourists and local needs and how different stakeholders use concepts such as “wild”, “domesticated”, “free” and “indigenous” in multiple and divergent ways. Notzke (2014), studying wild horses

through a political ecology lens, demonstrates a similar process where divergent perceptions of wild horses in Western Canada lead to various management practices. The perception of the wild horse is thus closely linked to how the wild horses are enacted in the world; the way the wild horse is discursively constructed affects the practices related to it. Notzke argues, however, that management practices are not only guided by human perceptions, and concludes “nonhuman agency and nonhuman charisma are the forces accounting for the dynamics of change in government approaches to wild horse management” (2013, p.408).

The latter is an idea that we would like to follow as it allows for an understanding of the horse not just as a “prop” for humans or an object that is enacted, but also as an actor that can enact itself in a reciprocal horse-human relationship. This implies that the horse can exercise agency in its encounters with humans (Dashper, 2017) and is similar to the ideas found in Donna Haraway’s (2003, 2008) research on companion species. In her study of the relationship between dogs and people, Haraway (2003, p.12) points to how dogs and people are intimately intertwined, at the same time as being co-evolved as a result of a “co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating and the relating is never done once and for all.”

Inspired by post-humanism/ANT-research, two particular studies on non-human agency in tourism have contributed with insights to our work. The first one is Carina Ren’s (2011) study of the Polish cheese *Oscypek*. The focus in this study is how the cheese, as a destination actor, connects and aligns with various entities of the tourist destination, enacting in what Mol (2002) calls *multiple realities*. The study shows how four versions of the cheese impact the destination, by producing, shaping and altering destination realities. In this study, Ren is able to show how tourism destinations can be understood through a radical ontology of multiple realities, which “challenges both researchers and

practitioners to reflect on the consequences of destination branding and management” (Ren, 2011, p.860). The other work that inspires our article is van der Duim, Ampumuza and Ahebwa’s (2014) study of the various versions of the Ugandan Gorilla. Their study shows how the gorillas are able to engage in multiple and partly connected networks (local people, hunters, conservationists, tourists etc.) and how the gorillas are shaped in and by the multiple discourses and relations through which they are connected.

### **The Kyrgyz horse in numbers and nation building**

While the number of horses declined globally, the number of horses in Kyrgyzstan rose in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations, n.d.). This trend must be seen in relation to the preceding Soviet period, which had led to great social and cultural changes in the nomadic lifestyle. The Soviet rulers declared nomadic pastoralism to be a non-viable life-style that should be abandoned (Schmidt & Sagynbekova, 2008). Nomadic groups were forcefully settled, and there were restrictions on the number of animals per family. According to Soviet plans, Kyrgyzstan was to be the main producer of merino wool for the Soviet textile industry, which led to “an increased specialization in merino sheep breeding while marginalizing horse husbandry” (Petric, 2015, p.8). After independence, this trend changed. The number of sheep fell by 30 percent and cattle by 12.5 percent, while horses increased by 23 percent in the three years following independence (Suttie & Reynold, 2003).

The equids continue to play an important role in contemporary Kyrgyzstan for transport and agricultural work as well as in producing meat, milk and hair (Shen, Han, Zhang, & Su, 2015). Horsemeat is an important part of the traditional Kyrgyz cuisine and Kyrgyzstan is ranked third in the world when it comes to horse-meat supply, with 3,50



kg per capita (for the year 2011), compared to a world average of 0.10 kg (Belaunzaran et al., 2015).

The number of registered horses in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 was 481,329, (National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, n.d). Statistics show that the number of horses is high compared to other countries and it is rising (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, n.d.; Suttie & Reynold, 2003). Hence, Kyrgyzstan does not seem to follow the pattern of the new equine economy, described by Evans and Vial (2015).

The rising number of Kyrgyz horses relates to the nation building process after independence. This process involved revival of the horsemanship and nomadic culture, where the Manas epic, claimed to be the longest national epic in the world, played a significant role (Schofield & Maccarone-Eaglen, 2011). The Manas epic tells the story of the Kyrgyz equestrian and warrior, Manas, who managed to conquer Chinese Turkestan and protect the Kyrgyz people from their enemies (Auezov, 1999). In 1995, only four years after independence, the first Kyrgyz president, Askar Akaev, initiated a celebration of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic with support by UNESCO. Akaev set out to develop a new state ideology, *the Manasology*, based on the horsemanship of Manas, as a replacement of the socialist ideology of the soviet past (Laruelle & Engvall, 2015; Petric, 2015). Manasology is still part of the mandatory curriculum from primary school up until university level (Levin, Daukeyeva & Köchümukolva, 2014).

For the Kyrgyz people the equestrian Manas was to become a symbol of strength, independence and the ability to defend themselves. The status of the horse in the Manas epic is evident in Straube's (2016, p.159) study of the Manas discourse where one of the informants explains, "Little children are put on horses by their fathers and told, hold on tightly, don't fall off, or you will disgrace the name of Manas".

Interestingly, the Manas epic also describes a hierarchy in horse-human relations for example in the account of the birth of Manas: As Manas is born, his father witnesses the birth of the first foal of spring. “[T]he dun mare that had never given birth, that special mare gave birth to a foal now, what she bore was no ordinary foal but a very special one” (Köçümkülkizi, 2005, pp. 3860-3870). Manas’ father names the foal and predicts he will become a heroic steed and wishes that a heroic rider will be born for him. “He will indeed be a strong horse whose hooves will never stumble” (Köçümkülkizi, 2005, p. 3920). The wish comes true, as the hero Manas is born at the same time as the foal. The dun mare had no name, but her owner right away named the foal that held the promise of stallion essence. The heroic steed stands out from the countless horses, and is by such a “tulpar”, a superior horse, thought to have mythical qualities. In his study of “Heroic figures and their horses in Mongolian-Turkish epics” Lipets (1984, p.3) finds that the tulpar and the rider become inseparable and “almost becomes equal partners” and that “sometimes [the horse] even stands higher than his hero” (Lipets, 1984, p. 125).

With the ancient nomad heritage in mind, we will now continue with a discussion on how the Kyrgyz horse is enacted. We will moreover discuss how the various enactments have been co-constituted in reciprocal relations, with attention to the non-human agency of the horse.

### **Various enactments and multiple agencies of the Kyrgyz horse**

By analysing both primary and secondary sources, we have been able to identify at least five enactments of the Kyrgyz horse, which we have called *the brand*, *the battle horse*, *the breed*, *the beshbarmak* and *the best friend*. While acknowledging that these enactments correlate, interact and are almost impossible to separate, we will nevertheless present each of these separately below.

### *The brand*

The official tourism information and promotion site of the Kyrgyz Republic, *Discover Kyrgyzstan*, shows horseback riding as one of the main “things to do” in Kyrgyzstan:

Horseback tours in Kyrgyzstan are as popular as trekking and hiking. Trails go through the virgin landscapes of Tien Shan and Pamir with pristine mountain lakes, beautiful spruce-fir forests and alpine meadows. One can taste kumys, a local Kyrgyz beverage made of mare's milk, learn about the local culture and spend unforgettable night in bozui<sup>1</sup> (Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism, Kyrgyz republic, n.d.)

The focus on horses and nomadic culture has become one of the strongest tenets in the branding of Kyrgyzstan (Krebs, 2012). Since independence, the so-called *jailoo-tourism*,<sup>2</sup> has been developed and promoted as the “authentic” way of discovering Kyrgyzstan. The idea of what Kyrgyzstan “ought to look like” for foreign tourists has been influenced and funded by Western development experts (Pyburn, 2018). With assistance from international agencies, such as Helvetas, the Swiss Association for International Cooperation, the so-called Community Based Tourism program was initiated in the year 2000, with an aim to foster rural livelihoods (Schofield & Maccarrone-Eaglen, 2011). Today the network extends throughout the whole of Kyrgyzstan offering an experience of the “nomadic way of life” and “authentic cultural heritage” (CBT, n.d).

A representative of a profiled tour operator, whom we interviewed, confirmed the importance of nomadic culture in their branding strategy:

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional nomadic tent, also known as yurt.

<sup>2</sup> Jailoo = summer pasture

*When we promote Kyrgyzstan as a destination for different countries, we use different words [...] Things we are telling is that [Kyrgyzstan] is a country of nomadic culture and country with nice, friendly people who can meet you and you will know about this people. [...] (Interview #11 Kyrgyz tour operator)*

The branding and promotion of Kyrgyzstan as a country of horses and nomadic traditions, must be seen in relation to the political process of nation building after independence. The revival of the ancient traditions not only became a way of finding a national identity, but moreover a way of distancing Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet past. This is evident in tourism promotional material such as the following quote from the website of one of Kyrgyzstan's most profiled travel agencies, Novi Nomad, founded through the Helvetas-program:

The Kyrgyz are one of the last truly nomadic peoples and 130 years of Communist and Tsarist rule have not quenched their spirit. Horses and horsemanship run in the blood and Kyrgyz children learn to ride horses before they can walk. Their horses are specially bred for riding and load carrying on mountain paths and are extremely sure-footed. They are famous for their quiet disposition and endurance, and will carry you easily across the mountains, valleys and glaciers of Kyrgyzstan. On horseback you will experience the wilderness and beauty of Kyrgyzstan first hand, [sic] and feel the genuine warmth and hospitality of the Kyrgyz people in their natural environment (NoviNomad, n.d.).

As much as the above quote is an advertisement for Novi Nomads horse-riding tours, it also shows the importance of the horse in the branding of Kyrgyzstan and the connection to the nation building discourse. The nomadic life style is described as a strong heritage that survived foreign rule and is seen as a triumphant rise of the old Kyrgyz traditions.

Horse riding can also be promoted as a low-carbon and eco-friendly way of exploring nature. This relates well to the global discourse on sustainable tourism, defined as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNEP/UNWTO 2005, p.12). That horse tourism can be linked to this global discourse gives tour operators offering this product a powerful marketing tool.

The above makes it reasonable to argue that the horses are well suited to be *used* by humans in tourism promotion and leisure activities. However, we would rather turn the argument around and argue that it is not the human’s ability to use the horse, but the agency of the horse itself that gives it the strong ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors as well as to various discourses. The horse is not only a cultural symbol of strength and survival, but it has also has the ability to create a co-constitutive relationship with other actors. The horse possesses particular qualities that enabled the Kyrgyz people to live a nomadic lifestyle in ancient times and moreover enables modern Kyrgyzstan to draw upon and develop this heritage in the present. This is obvious as the Kyrgyz people and their national identity as nomadic people would not have existed, if it was not for the horse. As the nomadic lifestyle is today a very important part of the Kyrgyz brand, it is possible to argue that the horse both enacts, but also enables the building of the Kyrgyz brand.

### ***The battle horse***

Related to the nation building process and branding mentioned above, another closely related enactment of the Kyrgyz horse emerged in our material: that of the Kyrgyz battle

horse. A plan to revive and popularize the nomadic horse games, has been so successful that it has turned into one of the biggest events in Kyrgyzstan. The biannual event, known as the World Nomadic Games, was organized for the first time in 2014, attracting participants and contestants from nomadic cultures from all around the world (World Nomad Games, n.d). Still relatively unknown, the World Nomad Games attract and amaze foreign visitors. However, the games are exotic and may challenge the Western view of horsemanship, for instance *kok-buro*, one of the most popular games, is described as “violent” (The Guardian, 04.11.2016), “savage to watch” (Women on the Road, 11.06.2018), “brutal” and “utterly beyond Western’s point of reference” (Hay, 2016), and is thought to “disturb animal right activists” (MacFarquhar, 2018). The game, where two teams both try to “score” by throwing a goat or sheep carcass into a goal, is also known as *buzkhasi* in Afghanistan and *gökbürö* in Turkey. The Kyrgyz version of the game was inscribed to the UNESCO list of intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017 (UNESCO, 2017).

Some of our informants mentioned the importance of the game for Kyrgyz people and national identity. One tourism entrepreneur explained:

*[Our ancestors] also played this game, kok-buro and other games. It is also our tradition. To us it is also interesting with kok-buro because it conserves our national...it is a national game. If we lose it, it would not be good for the people [...] It was also played during the Soviet Union, but not so much, because the government prohibited it. But now it is openly played. Now there is no Soviet Union and we have been given our own will and that is why we play it more (interview #8 horse tourism entrepreneur).*

The popularity of the traditional horse games has led to a rise in the prices of horses suitable for the games. This is evident in an interview with the owner of “Baron” allegedly

“the biggest battle horse in Kyrgyzstan”, published in the Kyrgyz newspaper “Delo”. The owner states that despite several offers, he will not sell his horse “even for 1 million dollars” since his horse has proved to be one of the best horses for the national game *ylak tartysh*, a variant of *kok-buro* (Delo, 26.04.2017, p. 21).

Likewise, a horse tourism entrepreneur that we spoke to explained that certain horses on the market have become very expensive, since they are being used for “real horse sports”.

He explained further:

*For kok-buro you need other types of horses. They are big and fast and they became very expensive [...] and if you gave such horses to tourists...well, [it would] not be dangerous, but it would be a risk* (interview #8, horse tourism entrepreneur).

From the statement above it becomes evident that even though the Kyrgyz horse is presented as a common brand, there is not just one generic type of horse. Rather, horse types are differentiated by their qualities. This point was emphasised also by other tourism entrepreneurs, who mentioned that a tourism horse should be calm and non-aggressive (interview #2, #4, #5 and #6). These are qualities opposite to that of the battle horse who is measured on the ability to fight and run fast, like Manas’ courageous and forceful warhorse, Toruchaar, a *tulpar* “with iron lungs and copper wrists”, who rode into battle “with enormous vigor [sic] and force” and was “not afraid of the hue and cry” (Köçüm kulkizi, 2005, p. 6770, 6750).

What we draw from the above is that the battle horse is able through horse games, such as *kok-buro*, to connect to the same discourses as that of nation building and Kyrgyz branding. Its ability to compete in the World Nomad Games, an international arena, also shows how it, together with its rider, is able to connect and engage in the preservation of

an ancient lifestyle as well as connect to global discourses of world heritage through the newly acquired UNESCO status.

At the same time, the agency of the Kyrgyz battle horse—fearless, powerful, and aggressive, qualities that are important for the co-constitutive horse-human relation in a game of *kok-buro*—is different and partly in conflict to the horse enacted and promoted as a tourism brand. An aggressive and fearless horse, keen to battle, does not fit into the role of a tourist horse that has to carry the tourist in a calm and safe way.

### ***The breed***

The enactment of the horse in nation branding and the revival of nomadic traditions is also connected to recent efforts to revive the Kyrgyz breed. During the Soviet period, this breed, also referred to as the “true Kyrgyz horse” (Cassidy 2009, p.14), was mixed with Russian and Arabian breeds, known as the *Novo Kyrgyz*, to increase the size. The small-sized ponies in Central Asia, which were well adapted to the mountainous regions and harsh climate “did not fit with imperial and Soviet notions of improvement, bureaucratic solutions and systematic intervention in animals (and people’s) lives” (Cassidy, 2009, p.12). While the weight of the Kyrgyz horse was recorded to be from 200 to 225 kilos in 1919, the weight of the Novo Kyrgyz can reach 500 kg (ATE Foundation, n.d.). One of the horse tourism entrepreneurs we interviewed explained:

*We have these horses, this breed, and this breed is the Kyrgyz breed. They are not very tall; they are medium sized, very healthy body. And they are very suitable in the mountains. They do not need much grass. They are also very enduring in wintertime. When we are at mountain passes at 4000 meter above sea level, it is very cold, there is snow, sometimes about one meter of snow. [T]hey are not cold, they are not affected. This*



*breed is the Kyrgyz breed. They are not orlovsy, or from Russia or English, or from Europe, these are pure Kyrgyz horse breed [sic]. Now, unfortunately, there are not that many of these horses left* (interview #8: horse tourism entrepreneur)

In 2004, an NGO known as the Kyrgyz ATE Foundation was established for the rehabilitation of the Kyrgyz horse and the revival of the equestrian traditions of the nomads. The founder of the ATE foundation, Jaqueline Ripart, a French journalist and horse enthusiast, warned that the genetic and cultural resource, which she claimed the breed represents, would disappear unless something was done to conserve it (Cassidy, 2009). The foundation subsequently established a stud farm with the purpose of selective breeding in 2011 (Chorshanbiyev, 2012). The organization also conducts an annual race festival, where only the “best horses of this “authentic” type [...], no taller than 1.49 cm, may participate” (Sears, 2013, p.5). The main objective of this festival is to highlight the essential qualities of the Kyrgyz breed and to identify the best horses for the revival of the breed (ATE Foundation, n.d.).

One of the horse tourism entrepreneurs, whom we interviewed, explained that Jaqueline Ripart had visited him:

*She was here, and she looked at our horses. She also said: “Azamat, you have to start breeding the Kyrgyz breed, because there are so few left of them”* (interview #8, horse tourism entrepreneur, the name has been changed for anonymity).

Another horse tourism entrepreneur also mentioned the process of bringing back the Kyrgyz breed:

*[The Kyrgyz horses] were all mixed during the Soviet Union. Some people are working to restore the Kyrgyz breed, but I do not know if it is possible. Most of the farmers have mixed horses* (interview #1, horse tourism entrepreneur).

Some of the tourism entrepreneurs we spoke with told us that they preferred the Kyrgyz breed as riding horses for tourists. To the question “what makes in your eyes a good tourism horse?” one of the tourism entrepreneurs replied:

*Pure breed of Kyrgyz horses, horses that are not mixed [...]. In the mountains there are many small and narrow passages, and the Kyrgyz horses are apt for that* (interview #2 horse tourism entrepreneur).

Another horse tourism entrepreneur explained:

*These [Kyrgyz horses] we use in the mountains, because when we ride upwards and downwards, it is very comfortable, especially for unexperienced tourists. These horses are very good for beginners, because they [...] know where to place their feet, how to jump, they know everything. This is in their blood, this breed, this Kyrgyz breed. [...]* *There are horses that are mixed, big horses [...] when they go down-hill they are like camels, well, not comfortable. They sometimes fall. These are not nice for tourists* (interview #8, horse tourism entrepreneur).

Despite the doubts whether a Kyrgyz breed actually still exists and moreover concerning their actual qualities (Sears, 2013), the above indicates that the Kyrgyz breed—and the idea of it— has a character “which is in the blood”, enabling the horse with such qualities to connect to and perform in the Kyrgyz tourism reality. Apart from this, the Kyrgyz breed has also been enacted in cultural and political discourses as a symbol that “represents something of a political and social victory over Russian and Soviet impositions” (Sears, 2013, p.6). It is interesting to note, however, that it is a European who initiated the revival of the Kyrgyz breed. It raises the question of whether the search for the “true Kyrgyz breed” is an externally imposed drive for the “pure” and “authentic” (Nordbø, 2009) and with that a culturally constructed perception of how the Kyrgyz horse

“ought to look”. This question relates to the global discourse of conservation and biodiversity. The discourse of nature conservation has long been combined with that of tourism, which was also the case in the aforementioned study of the Ugandan gorillas by van der Duim et al. (2014). Similar to gorilla conservation efforts in Uganda, local Kyrgyz people are encouraged to conserve the Kyrgyz breed, based on a conservation-development nexus. This rationale is evident in the quote below taken from a report on animal husbandry in Kyrgyzstan:

The gene pool of local Kyrgyz horses is valuable not only locally, but also globally. Though they are relatively young horses, they surpass horses of the new Kyrgyz breed in terms of meat, fattening and productivity qualities. Such products as kazy, zhal, zhaya, karyn, karta<sup>3</sup> are indispensable for mountain people in respect of caloric content. Therefore, scientific research and selection work to breed meat horses and to restore the gene pool of the Kyrgyz horse are urgent, for which it is necessary to create relict horse breeding farms. The strength of the constitution, hardness of hoof horns, robustness, originality of colour of local horses make them exotic and allows using them for development of mountain horse tourism in the country (Ajibekov, 2005, pp. 9-10).

The above discussion shows that the agency of Kyrgyz breed stems from both its qualities as enduring and suitable for harsh climate, which made it an actor on which the nomads were dependent for their lifestyle. It also shows that the Kyrgyz breed, or at least the idea of the Kyrgyz breed, has an ability to represent something that is thought of as pure and authentic, an ability that is enacted in various discourses such as nation building conservation and tourism development. However, as evident in the quote above, the

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<sup>3</sup> Various food products made from horse

Kyrgyz breed is also enacted in a way that does not fit well with the tourism reality, namely as a substance for food production.

### *The beshbarmak*

As mentioned earlier in the article, horsemeat is an important part of the Kyrgyz cuisine. Horsemeat is used in several national dishes such as the *beshbarmak*, a traditional dish consisting of noodles and finely chopped onion and meat, preferably the hindquarters of a horse. The dish is usually served to honoured guests (interview #12, young Kyrgyz woman).

While horsemeat is important, fermenting mares' milk to produce *kumys* is perhaps the most unique food tradition in Kyrgyzstan. Kumys is a drink produced from fermenting fresh, unpasteurized mares' milk and is used both as a national drink, a substitute for breast-feeding and as a main component of infant food. Furthermore, it is widely used in preventive and therapeutic medicine, as "a cure for all ills" and "source to youth" (interview #7 kumys vender). Horse milk therapy as a health retreat activity has recently grown in popularity mainly among domestic tourists and tourists from neighbouring countries. An increasing number of resorts and private operators in Kyrgyzstan are now providing services for horse milk therapy (Nordbø and Sagyntay kyzy, 2013). A Kyrgyz woman, with whom we spoke with while carrying out the therapy explained:

*Kumys is like a cure. We drink it five times a day during the treatment [...] at eight, ten, twelve, two and four. Those who drink the mare's milk can live until they are 80, 90 and 100 years* (interview #13, Kyrgyz tourist).

The healing effect of kumys was also explained by an entrepreneur whom we interviewed, who told us about how they had come up with the idea of starting their own business of kumys treatment:

*We started because my grandmother was ill, pancreas and a tumour in the stomach. She went to the doctors, who confirmed this. We wanted to find a natural way to heal it and had heard that kumys therapy might help, so we got some horses in order to provide the milk. Three years later my grandmother went back and took tests at the hospital and the doctors were very surprised when she turned out to be healed* (interview #1 horse tourism entrepreneur).

The horse milk industry is still very fragmented and unregulated. Several of the tourism entrepreneurs with whom we spoke, offered kumys therapy, but with big variances. Some only sold kumys to tourists along the road; some had it as a by-product, while at one place kumys therapy was the main product. In either way, kumys has proven to become an income supplement, also for pensioners, as an alternative to “wait for support of the government” (interview #7 Kyrgyz kumys vendor).

Selling of the mares’ milk on a commercial basis, connects the horse and the horse milk to yet another discourse, that of hygienic standards. This issue was raised in an interview with an expert from a Kyrgyz environmental NGO, who has been acting as a consultant for tourism developers. She explained:

*[The tourism developers] said: In summer we will do horse milk therapy [...]. I immediately asked them: “What about veterinarian control? The horses can also get sick! Who will look after the standards? That it will be right?”* (interview #14, environmental NGO consultant).

[Figure 1. About here]

Similar to Ren's study (2011) of the Polish cheese, the latter illustrates how the enactment of the Kyrgyz horse as a food product brings various and even conflicting discourses and practices into play. This is especially the case, when it comes to the consumption of horsemeat, a controversial issue, which in some countries, such as the USA, is considered immoral and even illegal. According to Belaunzaran et al. (2015, p.75) resistance towards eating horses may be explained because "this animal generates positive emotions, such as affection, closeness or tenderness, and for this reason horses are considered as a pet which has further stopped its consumption in several countries". In her book "Companion species", Donna Haraway (2003, p.10) reflects on this issue, arguing that "Generally speaking, one does not eat one's companion animals (nor get eaten by them); and one has a hard time shaking colonialist, ethnocentric, ahistorical attitudes towards those who do (eat or get eaten)". Although horses can be both a companion animal, that is an animal whose physical, emotional, behavioural and social needs can be readily met as companions in the home (ASPCA, n.d), or livestock, horsemeat consumption has been subject to much debate. This became evident in the so-called "horsemeat-gate" in the UK in 2013, a scandal that received massive media attention showing how horsemeat remains a social taboo in much of Western society (Abbots & Coles, 2013; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016). Although different, Kyrgyzstan had its own horsemeat scandal in 2016, when a Scottish miner, working at the much-debated Kyrgyz gold mine Kumtor, was deported from the country after having made offensive comments about the traditional horsemeat sausage *chuchuk* on his Facebook page (The Guardian, 03.01.2016). The case, which received international attention and caused a minor diplomatic crisis, was probably, more than anything, a protest against the controversial foreign ownership of the gold mine (for more on Kumtor see Kronenberg, 2014; Fumagalli, 2015). It nevertheless showed that

the image of horsemeat consumption relates to national pride and that horsemeat has a strong position in Kyrgyz culture. This is, however, not unique to Kyrgyzstan. Keeping large herds of horses suggests that they are bred for more than riding, for instance in a popular horse tourism destination such as Iceland, horses are bred for meat (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015).

It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that even though horsemeat is both a traditional and substantial part of the Kyrgyz cuisine, horsemeat is not prominent in Kyrgyz tourism promotion of traditional cuisine. None of the horse tourism entrepreneurs that we spoke to mentioned the use of horsemeat. Interestingly, but also maybe incidentally, the tour operator that we interviewed, who explained about the nomadic culture, said the following:

*“[Kyrgyz] were and are nomads still, [...] we use horses, yes, and we eat...ah...we slaughter sheep and we eat the meat of, yes, our own sheep”* (interview #11, Kyrgyz tour operator).

On the official website Discover Kyrgyzstan, there is also no mentioning of horsemeat, while one can read that “Beef, lamb, and goat that are grazed in mountain jai-loos, continue to dominate the table of Kyrgyz families and their frequent guests” (Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism, n.d.).

What we draw from the above is that there is no doubt that the horse is an important component in domestic Kyrgyz food culture. However, this version of the Kyrgyz horse and especially the enactment related to horsemeat, is largely hidden in the tourism reality encountered by tourists.

Contrary to the above, the last enactment of the Kyrgyz horse that we have traced in our material seems to be an emerging figure: the Kyrgyz horse as a best friend.

### *The best friend*

The changes in Western horse-human relationships mean that the horse has to a greater extent become a subject “with distinct personalities” (Daspher, 2017, p.30), rather than an object. This change, often referred to as “the animal turn” has led to a renegotiation of the human-horse relationship (Cassidy, 2002) at least in Western society. In his book *In the company of Animals*, James Serpell states: “Dogs and horses participate in the American society as subjects. They have proper personal names, and indeed we are in the habit of conversing with them as we do not talk to pigs and cattle” (Serpell, 1986, p.67).

From our material, we have found that the idea of the horse as a subject is also emerging in Kyrgyzstan. One of the tourism entrepreneurs explained:

*They [the tourists] take the animal as another person [...] and what is interesting is that it makes us look...to change us. For example, a very simple, simple thing; they give them names. Before we would shout: “Bring the black horse! Bring the brown horse! Bring the small one! Bring the other one!” Today we have names for our horses. (Interview #9 horse tourism entrepreneur)*

From what the tourism entrepreneur above says, the horse-human relations of Western tourists seem to be influencing the Kyrgyz relations with the horse. The hierarchic order of the horses, known from the Manas epic, where some horses are individuals, while others are mere matter, is challenged. It is no longer just the *tulpar*, the special horse, which is named, but also the dun mare.

When asked about differences between Kyrgyz people and Western tourists in relation to animals, one of the tourism entrepreneurs explained:

*In Europe or in America [...] the relation is very different from here in Kyrgyzstan. There they care for the horses. At first, when we started to work, for example, I worked*



*differently. And the foreigners that I worked with, they told me: “Azamat, you have to work like this, so that it will be good for the tourists”. And now, we clean the horses every day for when the tourists come [...] And we do not beat them [...] And when the tourists come, they approach [the horses] very affectionate. We used to have little of this, such things, but now we are used to it. [Now] we also respect the horses, so that they are happy, that they are clean. We also care for the horses. But before it used to be different, yes. (Interview horse riding entrepreneur #8, the name has been changed for anonymity)*

In the quote above, it becomes clear that Western tourists, through their human-horse relationship, define what the horse “ought to look like” (clean, happy) in order to attract and that to satisfy this value system is important in order to succeed. This relates to the previously mentioned study of Notzke (2014, p.408) who pointed to how the agency of the horse and its “nonhuman” charisma may lead to changed management practices.

When asked about what is most important with a horse tourism experience, a Dutch tourist who had just come back from a horse-riding trip explained:

*I want to see that the horses are healthy and that the people treat their animals right [...] I think that it is the [sic] most important to me [...] that they treat them well (interview #10, Dutch tourist).*

This care for the animals was apparent at one of the horse-riding trips that the first author joined. One of the mares was apparently pregnant and a male Dutch tourist riding it said, he felt sorry for her and worried that carrying the load of a rider would be harmful. On the same trip, another tourist, female from New Zealand, kept apologizing to her horse for leading it into wet and muddy areas to the amusement of the local Kyrgyz guides.

When asked about the difference in how tourists view the animals as opposed to the Kyrgyz, one of the horse tourism entrepreneurs reflected on difference in human-animal relations between foreigners and Kyrgyz people:

*Foreigners respect the horses more than Kyrgyz people do. They do not like to lash and beat them; they want to be friends with the horse. Kyrgyz people have a different relation to horses, they have many horses and too many to treat them as pets. Personally, I love them and try to treat them well but generally, people treat them as a resource for meat, milk and capital (interview # 4, horse tourism entrepreneur).*

The above shows that there is an understanding of the difference in horse-human relations between Kyrgyz and foreigner, which is mutual as seen in this comment by a Dutch tourist:

*The [Kyrgyz] see animals like, you **use** them, you need them for food, for work, for everything. And I think back in Europe, they see it more like a living thing, you have to treat it like a human being [...] because we don't need it so much anymore. (Interview # 10, Dutch tourist).*

It may be shocking for tourists, who only know the horse in a leisure context, to encounter horse cultures where horses are not only revered, but also consumed. For people who regard the horse as a companion, best friend, as a hero of children's books and films (Helgadottir, 2006; Pickel-Chevalier, 2017), or as a symbol of wilderness and freedom (Helgadottir, 2015), this may be a harsh reality not compatible with the desired tourism reality.

From our empirical material, it seems that the enactment of the Kyrgyz horse as a best friend is partly co-constituted through the emerging tourism reality together with discursive practices such as animal welfare. Our findings support other studies of animal

welfare in tourism, showing how an emerging animal ethic has led to changed practices, such as a ban of horse-drawn carriages in many cities “because people’s attitudes are changing in regards to the use of the horse” (Fennel, 2013, p.334).

## **Conclusion**

The position of the Kyrgyz horse has become increasingly important in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Contrary to many other countries, where the number of horses dwindles, the number of horses in Kyrgyzstan is on the rise. Apart from being source for food and transportation, the horse has become an important symbol in nation building and a prominent figure in Kyrgyz tourism development and promotion.

What we have attempted to show in this article is how the Kyrgyz horse connects to the tourism reality through various discourses and practices. Some of the discourses and practices draw upon one another, such as that of the breed, the branding and the battle horse while others, such as that of the *beshbarmak*, the branding and the best friend are in conflict.

Supported by political ecology studies, the article started by discussing how discursive practices contribute to social constructions of nature, including animals and how tourism becomes a powerful way of spreading social constructions of nature. The political ecology lens has thus helped us see how the enactment of the horse in present day Kyrgyzstan draws upon various discourses and knowledge regimes, some of which have been externally imposed. However, and inspired by post-humanist studies, we have attempted to show how the horse as an actor itself has agency, with an ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors (Ren, 2011). We have moreover attempted to show how the various enactments of the horse have been enabled by the agency of the horse through a co-constituted horse-human relationship, and the horse, therefore, must be seen

as much more than merely “an object of tourism” (Franklin & Crang, 2001, p.15). With this attempt, we decentre humans from human-animal studies (Wolfe, 2009) and challenge the anthropocentric ontology, which tends to categorize humans as separate from non-humans, and nature as separate from society (Latour, 2005; Müller, 2015).

Based on our analysis we argue that the Kyrgyz horse belongs to multiple realities (Mol, 2002) created through multiple enactments enabled by multiple agencies. The multiple enactments and agencies of the Kyrgyz horse as food source, a fighter, a cultural and historical symbol, a container of genes, and a pet, is what gives the horse the unique and important position in Kyrgyz culture and society. However, and quite in contrast to this, the branding of the Kyrgyz horse as a “unique” selling point in tourism development tends to reduce the complexity of the co-constitutive human-animal relations by down-playing the enactments that do not “fit” well with tourism. At the same time, tourism seems to brand, and thus create, a Kyrgyz “super-horse” as a strong, enduring and beautiful creature that becomes a cultural symbol for the authentic and pure Kyrgyz nation. This somewhat resembles the same process as explained in Arne Kalland’s (2009) study of the creation of the whale among environmentalists where all good qualities of various whales become melted together into a “super-whale”, a symbol for life in the ocean and a “paradise lost”.

Hence, our material also indicates that tourism does not only draw upon (or down-play) existing enactments, but also creates new human-horse relations and discourses. Tourism leads to what Haraway (2003) has called a co-evolutioned relationship, where humans and animals are being intertwined in new relations, guided by what Franklin (1999) argues is strong emotional and moral content in post-modern Western society. This is supported by our findings showing that the Kyrgyz horse entrepreneur to some extent adapts to the value system of the tourist and global quality standards of equestrian

tourism. This relates to the questions of animal welfare which, in further research, would be an interesting topic to study in a Kyrgyz context. With European tourists demanding healthy, well-treated horses with names, the distinction between the *tulpar*, a packhorse and a milking mare is blurred. Where the dun mare formerly was one of countless horses, she is now not only producing healing milk or perhaps giving birth to a *tulpar*, she also has a name and a Dutch friend—who most likely will not be at the party where she eventually will be enjoyed as beshbarmak.

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