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The Role and Meaning of Fictive Rituals in Cultural Tourism

Abstract. Tourism is an important and growing industry, which can serve as a relevant source of livelihood in small and remote communities. In some rural areas, it offers new possibilities, e.g. in the form of ethnic tourism and cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a small branch of tourism that can offer new experiences and new ways to understand culture. When combined with other aspects of tourism, such as ecological tourism, it can provide the framework and opportunities for new understandings of the world that go far beyond the circle of the local community. What can small ethnic communities offer to international tourism groups? What part of their cultural heritage is "ready" to be shown to tourists? What of "invented rituals," which some ethnic communities present to tourists, and which may seem authentic to the consumer, but are not, in fact, part of the traditional culture repertoire? This article is based on my experiences, notes, and photographs, of a journey I took along the Lena River in the Sakha Republic of Russia. I observed how the local Sakha and Evenki communities presented a particular ethnic programme for cruise tourists. I will discuss the function, role, and meaning of fictive rituals in tourism for the local community. Although they cannot be regarded as "authentic," such rituals are important in terms of preserving the cultural heritage of the community.

Keywords: authenticity, cultural heritage, invented tradition, Lena River, rituals, Sakha Republic, tourism.

Introduction

Cultural heritage is currently a key term in the field of ethnology, and has made its way into popular culture discourse. It is not difficult to see and experience how culture and one of its products, cultural heritage, are commodified. In European ethnology, culture is viewed as a part of the dynamic process that is constantly creating and recreating it. Scholars conceive of cultural heritage in several ways; my primary reference is the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Role of Heritage in Society from 2005, in which cultural heritage

is treated as a group of resources inherited from the past with which people identify, independent of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions. This framework includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time.[1] Note that not everything described as culture is created or constructed as cultural heritage; it is always a question of process, of how something is valued, chosen, created, or constructed. Cultural heritage is used as a working tool, e.g. in tourism (Hieta, Hovi, and Ruotsala 2015: 313—316).

Tourism is an important and growing industry, which can serve as an important source of livelihood in small and remote indigenous communities. In some rural areas, it offers new possibilities, e.g. in the form of ethnic tourism and cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a small branch of tourism that can offer new experiences and new ways to understand culture. When combined with other aspects of tourism, such as ecological tourism, it can provide the framework and opportunities for new understandings of the world that go far beyond the circle of the local community. In this article, my aim is to discuss what small ethnic communities can offer to international tourism groups. What part of their cultural heritage is "ready" to be shown to tourists? In some cases, ethnic communities present "invented rituals," which may seem authentic to the consumer, but are not, in fact, part of the traditional culture repertoire

This article is based on my experiences, notes, and photographs from the summer of 2014 when I travelled for two weeks with an international tourist group along the Lena River from Yakutsk to Tiksi and back again. During the trip, we were introduced to, and shown, different folklore programmes, visited museums and exhibitions, enjoyed dance and music programmes, took part in different touristic acts, and so forth. For the most part, these moments were the only times when it was possible for the tourists to see and meet rural indigenous people. I will not here discuss the different lectures, concerts, and speeches that we took part in while on the ship; rather, I will focus only on the programmes offered us while on the shore and in the villages. We saw and participated in different rituals five times.

The importance of rituals in tourism

Depending on where, and how, one spends one's holidays, it is possible to encounter a number of different cultural traditions and rituals, which are presented as though they are ancient, as well authentic and currently lived, traditions. While their apparent age and practice may be enticing, leading us to believe we are witnessing reflections of long-lived cultural repertoires, in many cases their origins were not in fact sanctioned as a result of being practiced for many centuries, but were invented comparatively recently under the impetus of a growing tourism industry that needed programmes for tourists. Many studies on cultural heritage engage with the topic of tourism in indigenous areas (for example see Bendix 2000). A prominent example is the cultural tourism developed around Sámi culture, where fictive rituals are performed for, and clothes resembling traditional Sámi costumes are sold to, tourists (see e.g. Ruotsala 2008: 41—53; Mathisen, 2010: 53). In one case, in a so-called Lappish baptism, which has nothing to do with the proper life, culture, and history of the Sámi people, the Sámi are portrayed as a dirty and funny people. This is an entertainment created for tourists, an entertainment that relies on problematic stereotypes. In this ritual of baptism, the man who gives the baptism is usually dressed in a dirty, supposedly, Sámi dress; his face is soiled with coal. There are different variations on this "Lappish" baptism routine. It is usual to alarm and tease the participants both verbally and physically. The ceremonial master puts an ice cube on the neck of the shamans or covers their eyes so they cannot see the place or ceremony. Other common elements, such as marking (scarring or disfiguring) and drinking can also be used as frightening or thrilling component. Some of the performers pretend they are willing to cut a mark on the ear with a big knife, as in branding a reindeer calf. The participants will get a mark with coal on their face. At the end of the ceremony, the tourists share a drink, which is said to be reindeer milk, but which often tastes bad, salty and acidic. This is all a performance created for the tourists, who, when it is over, get a diploma for participating in it. How the Sámi culture is exploited by the tourism industry has been the subject of many articles, websites, and, even, demonstrations.[2] The misuse, and misrepresentation, of indigenous culture and indigenous ways of dress in the tourism industry is an on-going dilemma.

In spite of these problems of misuse and misrepresentation, the rituals that we were shown during the cruise trip are important for the performers for several reasons. They are significant traces and indicators that can be used as evidence of important links to the past. They are also relevant as modern conceptions of nationalistic symbols, e.g. when there is a question of indigenous people or an ethnic group existing as a minority group among a majority population—as is the case in my example from the Sakha Republic. Rituals as well as cultural heritage are different from the perspective of the audience than for those making or creating the rituals or performances. They are also important in terms of preserving the cultural heritage of a community and passing it on to future generations. Issues and questions surrounding authenticity are ones that require much more space and time than this brief article provides, and would, indeed, require a detailed exploration of the history and culture of the people living along the Lena River and in the Sakha Republic to be juxtaposed with current practices and performances, and the detailed problematizing of how we, in the early 21st century, construct authenticity.

Still, I will give some general, background, information of the people who live in Sakha. The population of Sakha is quite diverse and reflects the history of Russia, or, at least, of the earlier Soviet Union. The almost one million inhabitants of the Sakha Republic are Yakuts or Sakha people (45.5%), Russians (more than 40%), Ukrainians (3.7%), Evenki (1.9%), Evens (approximately 1.2%), Tatars (1%), Buriats (less than 1%), and white Russians. Sakha was also part of the earlier archipelago of prisons and camps. In the villages, a significant percentage of the people are considered "mixed" in the sense that their parents or grandparents originally came from different ethnicities. All in all, it is estimated that Nordic indigenous peoples (Evenks, Evens, Yukagirs, Chukchis, Tsuvashes, and Dolgas) account for just over 2% of the population. According to the Information Center under the President of Sakha Republic, the religious demography is as follows: Russian Orthodox, 44.9%; shamanistic, 26.2%; non-religious, 23.0%; new religious movements, 2.4%; Islam, 1.2%; Buddhism, 1.0%; Protestant, 0.9%; Catholic, 0.4%. In spite of the religious diversity, all of the rituals that we saw were connected most closely to shamanism.[3]

The rituals we saw along the Lena river

First, we arrived at Lena Pillars Nature Park, *Lenskie Pillars*, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to the leaflet[4] we received, "passengers are invited to the shore for a ceremonial traditional show by a Sakha shaman couple." There, we took part in a purifying ceremony which was done by a Sakha couple and their daughter. We were told that the man was a shaman (Fig. 1). All three were dressed in Sakha costumes and were decorated with many jewels. They danced and performed the ritual, making the fire and conducting the cleansing ceremony. The tourists were divided so that the men were on one side of the fire and the women on the other side. At the end of the ceremony, all of the participants danced and shouted some phrases based on instructions from the shaman. In the end we all got a mark with coal on our forehead. When the show was over, people could admire the clothes and take more pictures with the couple.

We next witnessed a ceremony at the village of Zhigansk, north of the Arctic Circle, where we had to walk along the shore through a human gate while listening to an Evenki man play the drums while the others

Fig. 1. At the purifying ceremony, 2014. Photo: Helena Ruotsala

were singing. We were told that they were dressed as traditional Evenki. Then, we continued on our journey along the beach, where we met a fishing family; they were sitting on a reindeer fur, and one was "cleaning a fishing net" (Fig. 2). There, we could eat some fish soup and taste reindeer meat. In actuality, the people sitting there were the same ones who had been drumming and singing. After that, we continued our walk to the museum, where we were treated to a half-hour dance performance by Nordic indigenous people. The dances were introduced to us, along with the name of the cultural group and the particular dance. The dances were performed adeptly and were quite illustrative; for instance, a reindeer dance showed us a reindeer, and so forth. All villagers could perform, and the dancing show took quite a long time. Our leaflet told us (in somewhat awkward English) that, "you will be impressed by performance of local actors who will present a music of blowing snow and wind whistle, whisper of leaves and grass, water hush, rush of flying bird wings through improvised epic songs and charming accords of ritual dancing." After the performance, we saw two exhibitions in the museum. Outside, in a Sakha summer house, we met a villager who made handicrafts

Fig. 2. The fishing family at the beach, 2014. Photo: Helena Ruotsala

out of mammoth bone. In terms of cultural tourism, we were able to enjoy a folk concert, meet local residents, sample local food, and buy souvenirs.

On the following days, we visited three other locations: Tiksi, a town on the Arctic Sea, and the villages of Kusur and Siktyakh. In all three places, we were invited to visit the local house of culture,[5] where local residents performed dances, songs, and recited poems for us. In Kusur, a chum[6] had also been erected in the garden, where we could buy some souvenirs. At the house of culture, there was an exhibition of traditional clothes and artefacts related to reindeer herding and river fishing. We read (again, not in the most fluent of English, given by the advertisers) the following about Kusur: "You will enjoy the hospitality of local residents, most of which are native hunters, reindeer farmers, and skillful crafters. You will have a chance to buy original handmade crafts and souvenirs here (embroidery, braiding, clothes made of deer skin, wood and mammoth tusk crafting items)."

At Tiksi, we saw several dances performed by adolescents and children. The music was in the playback style. After that, we were invited to visit a summer chum on the tundra. It had a gas stove where several old women prepared fish soup and some reindeer meat for us, after first lighting the fire and conducting a purifying ritual when we arrived at the camp (Fig. 3). Everything was made from scratch for us; one woman said they had been waiting for us for several hours. Of course, the scenery was breathtaking, the food was delicious, and the folk costumes of the women were beautiful.

The last place where we enjoyed local rituals was the village of Siktyakh. Once again, we participated in a purification ritual conducted by local villagers, who we were told were Evenki people, and we enjoyed dances at the local house of culture (Fig. 4). We also visited an old Evenki woman who had organised for us some local food to taste and some old artefacts to see outside the house. She told us that she had collected stories from the local people and wanted to publish them in a book.

In all the events we witnessed, the local people were reportedly dressed in traditional costumes. Some of them were dressed in festival attire (e.g. in dance costumes). These were also some of the only

Fig. 3. The purifying ceremony, 2014. Photo: Helena Ruotsala

Fig. 4. Dances at the local house of culture, 2014. Photo: Helena Ruotsala

times that we had the opportunity to taste local food; the ship's restaurant was Russian, and the food was made in the Moscow style cuisine (not local style). These were also some of the only times that we met local people and had the chance to speak a few words with them, and enjoy a local cultural programme. The programme guide stated again that, "You will have a chance to buy original handmade crafts and souvenirs here (embroidery, braiding, clothes made of deer skin, wood and mammoth tusk crafting items). You will enjoy the hospitality of local residents, most of which are native hunters, reindeer farmers, and skilful crafters." Nothing was told to us about the authenticity or origin of these rites, dances, and purifications rituals. We met with several ethnic groups, but the rituals, costumes, and programme were mixed up; it was difficult to make a distinction between the different ethnic groups.

Authentic culture or invented tradition?

The key concern of my paper is to question the purpose and meaning of such tourist programmes for the performers. The function, role, and meaning of the fictive rituals—I suggest that they can also be fictional—in tourism are different for the local community. Although the rituals cannot be regarded as "authentic," they are important in terms of preserving the cultural heritage of the community. But, as I stated earlier, my aim is not to discuss here the authenticity of the cultural programmes performed for tourists.

The rituals that we saw could be regarded as fictional or invented traditions. Historian Eric Hobsbawm argues that many traditions that "appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented." He distinguished between the invention of traditions and starting or initiating a tradition that does not then claim to be old at all. The phenomenon is particularly clear in the development of the modern nation-state and nationalism. According to Hobsbawm, traditions can be invented, constructed or formally instituted. Invented traditions can refer to a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules, and rituals of a symbolic nature that seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour via repetition, which automatically imply continuity with the past. Each of the villages attempted to establish continuity with a suitable

historic past—at least for touristic purposes—in Hobsbawm's sense of fictional or invented traditions. They formed a complex interaction between past and present (Hobsbawm 1983: 1—13).

Why are the rituals so important that they form an essential part of the show? They serve as important symptoms and, therefore, indicators of problems that might not otherwise be recognised. They are evidence. Their relation to the past is also important. In that sense, they are, according to Eric Hobsbawm, relevant to modern conceptions of nationalistic symbols, e.g. to nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, and histories (Hobsbawm, 1983: 10—13). We must keep in mind that the meaning is different for those who are performing the rituals than for the spectators, who cannot understand the behind-the-scenes issues—i.e. what is not being told.

Invented traditions are essentially a process of formalisation and ritualisation characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). But authenticity as cultural heritage is always a social or cultural construction. There can be no authenticity if nobody has labelled something as authentic. Another concept, that of heritage, is also very much a social and cultural construct, and, like authenticity, it is always a product of somebody or some group. Likewise, it is not heritage if no one has said that it is heritage (Bendix 2000: 38—42; Hovi 2014: 196).

As Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett has stated, heritage is not something that is lost, found, or stolen and reclaimed; rather, it is a mode of cultural production (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 50). Tuomas Hovi, who has studied Dracula tourism in Romania, also points out that we have to bear in mind that heritage is constructed for a particular purpose, and, in that sense, it also shows importance. It is important because it must hold a special place within the cultural and historical understanding of the particular group in question (Hovi 2014: 196).

What we saw during the trip was important in terms of the performances; we do not need to think about its authenticity or genuineness as such. The meanings and functions of the programmes and rituals can be seen as cultural heritage, the task of which is also to construct and strengthen one's identity. But when cultural heritage is

institutionalised, it is also in danger of losing its central purpose and disappearing. Both the heterogeneity and role of cultural heritage are important.

I refer once more to Hovi's study on Dracula tourism because there are many commonalities between it and the indigenous heritage on display in the Sakha Republic (Hovi 2014: 196). By showing us their important sites and culture, by presenting the people, their customs, costumes, art and culture, local artists and local heritage, the villagers showed us what is important for them, in the sense of how they are representing themselves to outsiders. It is also possible that these performances could constitute some form of opposition, but this was never directly told to us. It was difficult to interpret the dances and lyrics without knowing them better, and knowing what other dances and lyrics in other settings might be. In the act of the moment, the performances were framed for us, the tourists and consumers, as "the real thing."

All in all, the shows that we saw during the journey deepened our understanding of how the local people are framing their culture, and performing that culture as a commodity. The local people might also have shared something with us about their feelings as a nation, even if in some sort of opposition to an alternate point of view. The performances are a good business for them, allowing them to package aspects of their culture for outsiders. To the extent that such a business allows both the propagation of the packaged cultural performances, as well as the continuation of local life, it can be seen as supportive of cultural heritage preservation.

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Notes

1. Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. Faro, 27.10.2005. Available at http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/199.htm (last accessed on November 27, 2016).

2. See e.g. the Facebook page Daja II fake samegárvvuide—Say NO to Fake Sámi Costumes. Available at https://www.facebook.com/groups/19862103008/ (last accessed on November 27, 2016).

3. See Information Center under the President of Sakha Republic. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakha_Republic (last accessed on November 27, 2016).

4. The leaflet refers to unprinted papers that we received from the travel agency. They were written in English and in Russian.

5. In Russia since the Soviet times in many towns and bigger village settlements there are buildings which are called the Club or the House of culture, where different cultural activities take place. House of culture was the key institution for cultural activities and implementation of state cultural policies in all socialist states. It was officially responsible for cultural enlightenment, moral edification, and personal cultivation. See more in Donahoe & Habeck 2011.

6. A *chum* is a temporary dwelling used by the nomadic Uralic reindeer herders of northwestern Siberia.

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