

3 Recognizing uniqueness

On (not) comparing the World Nomad Games

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The World Nomad Games, a six-day event consisting of competitions in nomadic sports such as eagle-hunting, archery, wrestling, and horse-racing, and embedded in an extensive ‘cultural’ programme, were held biannually in Kyrgyzstan from 2014 to 2018. They were created with the explicit aim to offer an alternative to the Olympics, one that would put Kyrgyzstan on the world map. Irrespective of its successes in these grand aims, the World Nomad Games (hereafter also referred to as ‘the Games’ or ‘WNG’) generated palpable enthusiasm among participants and spectators, and it is by quoting two such instances that I wish to introduce this chapter.

- ‘This is Kyrgyzstan! No one is strong like us. *Real* men! You don’t have this in Europe’. The claims were made in excitement by a middle-aged Kyrgyz man, just after we had watched a game of *kok boru*, a violent form of polo, in which the Kyrgyz team had decimated its opponent.
- ‘You *really* cannot compare this to anything else’. Seated around a campfire at night, the American expat who thusly characterized the World Nomad Games went on to praise its ‘authentic’ and ‘organic’ feel.

The idea of the World Nomad Games as a ‘one of a kind’ phenomenon resonated widely among participants, spectators, and commentators. In conversations, online posts, and news reports, they cited the extraordinary nature of the featured sports, the unique qualities of its competitors, and the incomparability of the whole thing. Such invocations of the Games’ uniqueness and incomparability provide us with an interesting puzzle. While the statements (quite literally) rejected the possibility of comparing the Games to anything else, *communication about* the perceived unique characteristics was unavoidably based on (implicit) comparisons with that which lacked these characteristics.¹ Instead of seeing this as some sort of epistemic fallacy, it will be more productive to explore what the denials of comparability reveal of the ‘prickly’ nature of comparison.

When the American expat proclaimed the incomparability of the WNG, she referenced the spontaneous and organic way of organizing a festival,

which in her view was clearly ‘for the people’. Without making it explicit, she thereby communicated that these features had been absent from other events she had experienced or knew about. But even if this meant that she *was* comparing, we should consider why such comparison needed to remain implicit and be denied. I suggest that denying the possibility of comparison served to emphasize difference, and thereby placed the Games in a category of its own. It also presented the (non-)comparer as a connoisseur who cared about authenticity and spontaneity, meanwhile increasing the value of having attended these – unique – World Nomad Games. Clearly then, the denial of comparability is useful even when unavoidably being part of comparative practice.

Speaking from a different position, my Kyrgyz acquaintance was unconcerned with ‘authenticity’, but he was exalted that the Games revealed, as he saw it, the ‘incomparable strength’ (*nesravnennaia sila*) of the Kyrgyz. I quoted my acquaintance from a longer monologue in which he highlighted the uniquely masculine qualities of Kyrgyz horsemen, which purportedly had long been lost by all other people, and certainly by Europeans with their guns (and other machinery).² This invocation of ‘incomparable’ strength unlocked a different meaning of comparison. As documented in the Oxford English Dictionary, while the verb ‘compare’ is derived from the Latin *comparare* (to bring together), phrases such as ‘beyond compare’ are probably derived from the now obsolete term ‘compeer’, which refers to an ‘equal’ or to ‘someone of equal standing or rank’.³ The ‘compeer’ logic resonates with the Russian term for comparison (*sравнение*) used above, which has as its root in the word ‘equal’ (*равnyi, ровния*). In this view, to compare is to test for equality (and thereby establish standing). And surely, the best proof of being in a ‘league of one’s own’ is to overwhelmingly defeat opponents in a competition where the relevant strengths and skills are tested – thereby providing proof of being ‘incomparably’ better.⁴

These etymological details underscore the diversity of the logics and purposes that inform acts of comparison, and of non-comparison. If the expat rejected comparability to thereby preserve the *integrity* of the object (which a ‘bringing together’ would undermine), for my Kyrgyz acquaintance the purpose was to highlight its *superiority* (in other words, to deny equality). And yet, these two aspects (which are linked to the *comparare* and *compeer* logics of comparison) could not be fully disentangled or separated. In fact, their intersection enabled a temporary agreement on the uniqueness of the World Nomad Games, which thereby also offered a partial escape from dominant comparative frameworks. I emphasize the temporary and partial nature of such a joint challenge to established frameworks, not only because of the unstable meaning of ‘incomparability’, but also because the desire to have uniqueness *recognized* depends on making the associated ideas public, a process that necessarily implies comparison.

This tension is a central aspect of recognition. As Webb Keane points out, to the extent that recognition is dialogical, it is fundamentally unstable

because it ‘cannot be entirely in my hands’ (1997: 14). We can observe this tension in all human relations, at least if we accept Hegel’s point that self-consciousness exists only in being acknowledged as well as his assertion that ‘people *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another’ (Hegel 1977 [1802]: 111–112). One of the key issues here is that for subjects to feel recognized, it is insufficient to be noticed or seen; they need to be noticed and seen in ways that resonate with their self-perception. As Axel Honneth puts it, recognition is a complex communicative process between sender and receiver, which is only genuine when the recognizer has identified and acknowledged as positive a contrastive value with which the recognized subject identifies (2007: 339–345).

The complexity of social recognition is also due to its concrete manifestations always, and necessarily, being entangled in larger webs of relations. Recognition travels, as it were, along different social axes and across scales. If we started by zooming in on how individual athletes are motivated at least in part by a desire for recognition, then we see how in a sport such as *kok boru* these motivations converge in a collective in pursuit of victory, with the value of such victory dependent on its reception by an audience. We would also need to change perspective to see how audiences are constituted. Perhaps zooming in on supporters – such as my acquaintance who lauded the skills and strength of the Kyrgyz players – to observe how a sense of achievement spreads among supporters the moment an opponent is defeated. But the desired recognition is still dependent on its ability to resonate with the view of others. Will the other team agree to have been defeated fairly? Will the Nomad Games manage to attract broad – global – attention? And will viewers – especially those that matter – properly appreciate what they see?

While the desire for recognition is probably universal, its intensity fluctuates, and its features vary. Charles Taylor documents how ‘recognition’ only emerged as a *generalized problem* in modern times, when the age of democracy ushered in ‘a politics of equal recognition’, based on the notion that all citizens are equally deserving of respect (1994: 27).⁵ In the next section, I describe parallel developments in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), paying particular attention to the creation of a federal framework within which ideas of ‘national culture’ were expressed and exchanged. The disintegration of this framework in the post-soviet period caused considerable uncertainty and disorientation (see also Grant 1995), which in Kyrgyzstan translated into a (politicized) desire to assert its cultural traditions onto the world stage. Emerging within this context, the World Nomad Games embodied the promise of global recognition for a people who found themselves on the margins of an imagined global community.

As a deliberate attempt to gain global recognition, the World Nomad Games expose the tension between projection and reception. This tension will be explored in the chapter’s subsequent sections, emphasizing both its fragile nature and transformative potential. Assertions of uniqueness are

fragile because, to paraphrase Keane (1997) once more, ‘recognition is not entirely in my hands’, and hence dissonance always lurks around the corner. A good example was when foreign commentators embraced the Nomad Games’ uniqueness but did so in an exoticizing and stereotyping manner. Describing the Games as fascinatingly out-of-time, they suggested it was an event at which Genghis Khan would have felt at home, and that if he had still been alive, he ‘would have wanted to be a *kok boru* captain’, as one of many Genghis-Khan-posts had it.⁶ Here, recognition risked slipping into ridicule. But while fragile, assertions of uniqueness do have transformative potential. If we acknowledge that *genuine* recognition is irreducible (as it fully acknowledges the authenticity of the recognized subject), then it potentially breaks open social space. When the views of organizers, participants, and spectators converged, they thereby not only produced a critique of hegemonic structures (e.g. the dominance of the Olympics in the field of sport), but potentially transformed the playing field.

In this introduction, I meandered from comparison to recognition and back, to thereby test the ground in which to stake this chapter’s twofold analytical contributions. The first is to use the concept of recognition to illuminate the affective dimensions of comparative work. Specifically, I argue that the need to be seen, and be seen in particular ways, influences which kinds of comparisons are pursued, and which are resisted, as well as the comparative techniques that are put into play. And second, I use the prism of comparison to explore aspects of recognition that do not usually receive attention. Drawing on the differences between the *comparare* and the *compeer* mode of comparative practice, I argue that recognition is about integrity as much as it is about standing, and that it is by paying attention to the interplay of both dimensions that we may come to understand how the dilemma of ‘recognizing uniqueness’ is solved.

I will return to these issues in the concluding section but wish to emphasize that it is the World Nomad Games that will do the heavy lifting in making these analytical points. The Games’ trope of incomparability pinpoints the tension between projection and reception that always troubles recognition. The tension exists because recognition depends as much on familiarity as on difference and is charged as much by expectation as by novelty, features that skew cognition and hence complicate the workings of *recognition*. It is partly because of this that genuine recognition is rare and that comparisons are prickly. These tensions were particularly pronounced in the case of the WNG, with its promise to counteract Kyrgyzstan’s marginal position and claim its rightful place on the world stage. To unravel and demonstrate these points successfully, we first need to see how the Nomad Games came about.

Celebrating cultural uniqueness on the world stage

In her book *The Spectacular State*, Laura Adams asks the important question of how citizens of small and peripheral countries ‘understand their nation’s

greatness' (2010: 38). As members of a group, to conceive of such greatness, we all need to have *our thing*. The issue is not straightforward. Claims to historical authenticity that make the 'thing' *ours* and outward projections that make the thing a *thing* are fraught with tension. The 'thingness' of the Kyrgyz nation had developed parallel to its position within the USSR, and was shaped by the Union's principle that its constituent groups could be 'national in form' but should be 'socialist in content'.⁷

As the titular nation of one of the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics, the Kyrgyz were firmly locked into an elaborate institutional framework that defined the scope and means by which their national idea could be advanced. Politically and culturally, Kyrgyzstan was represented at Union level, and endowed with its own linguistic, educational, and cultural institutions. Obviously, in a federal socialist state, 'culture' needed to be apolitical, needed to be classless, and needed to be irreligious. To the extent that this vision was put into practice, public expression of culture became 'folklorised', a process that entailed the selective appropriation of cultural forms for representative purposes and was conducive to the production of standardized and secularized national traditions (see Cash 2011; Pelkmans 2007). The effects were certainly also seen in the realm of sport, for example in the emergence of national – e.g. Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Tajik – 'wrestling traditions'.⁸

The Soviet ethno-cultural framework, discursively expressed as the 'friendship of nations', enabled communication about these secularized 'national' traditions. It was an essential feature of the Soviet system that members of the Republics learned about each other. As Maxim Gorky, the 'father' of Soviet literature put it: 'It is important for all union Republics that a Belorussian knows what a Georgian or a Turk is like, etc'. In practice, this meant that among the most visible aspects of official Soviet culture were the tours by dancers, orchestras, and athletes from each Republic to all other Republics (Slezkine 1994: 447–448). It was by means of this elaborate system of 'secular pilgrimages' that distinctly Soviet ideas of culture gained broad currency, shaping expectations concerning 'national' repertoires of art, custom, and leisure. And whatever its inadequacies, the framework facilitated mutual recognition within a fixed set of audiences.⁹

The above clarifies, somewhat, why the issue of recognition had become so central, why it obtained the characteristics it had, and why it became so problematic after the collapse of the USSR. Whereas the confined and highly regulated framework of the Soviet Union had guaranteed some level of cultural representation and acknowledgment, none of this continued to exist when the framework came undone. There no longer was a guaranteed audience for cultural displays; in fact, as many Kyrgyz became painfully aware, most people outside the former Soviet Union had never even heard of Kyrgyzstan or the Kyrgyz people. And importantly, all of this happened at a moment in world history when nations felt increasingly compelled to present themselves to global audiences, not just inspired by a Hegelian desire for mutual recognition, but also because 'brand recognition' came to be seen

as a precondition for national success in the global economy.¹⁰ In response, the newly independent Republic of Kyrgyzstan oriented itself towards the European Union and the United States. In the mid-1990s it styled itself as the ‘Switzerland of Central Asia’, in which the qualities of democracy, stability, and mountainous landscapes were supposed to come together. As part of a nation branding effort, such projections were aimed at attracting foreign investment and tourism, something that proved rather difficult to accomplish (see Pelkmans 2017: 23–31).

Since independence in 1991, the Kyrgyztani government made several attempts to reach into its past to retrieve, and then project onto the world, its ‘thing’. These efforts relied heavily on the registers that had worked during Soviet times, especially those of ‘tradition’ and ‘high culture’. Thus, in the 1990s elaborate steps were taken to promote its most famous novelist, Chingiz Aitmatov, by making him Kyrgyzstan’s ambassador to the European Union and by turning his books into films and by subsidizing translations into many languages. Another effort that stood out was the active promotion of the *Manas* epic – which centres on the words and deeds of medieval tribal leader *Manas* – as the world’s longest epic poem that continues to be orally recited. As part of these efforts a mass-celebration of *Manas*’s supposed 1000th birthday was organized in 1995. But neither the claim to longest epic nor the wisdoms of tribal leader *Manas* resonated very strongly with foreign audiences. Wider recognition remained elusive; moreover, these early efforts failed to deliver tangible benefits, such as increased tourism.

The World Nomad Games, by contrast, managed to appeal to a global audience and thereby offered a means by which Kyrgyzstan could find a way out of its perceived irrelevance. It promised to be a tool or mechanism by which ‘some people can make their marginality central’, as Sarah Green put it (2006). The concept for the Games had developed in several stages. When president Atambaev first pitched the idea during a regional meeting of Central Asian leaders (in 2011), the plan was to name it the ‘Turkic Games’, and to have it circulate among the ten or so Turkic-speaking countries and autonomous regions. Presumably to broaden its appeal beyond Turkic-speaking populations, the event eventually emerged as the World Nomad Games, with the explicit aim of celebrating Kyrgyz history. As president Atambaev put it during the opening ceremonies of the first edition: ‘The Kyrgyz people, with their rich history, culture, and traditions, were among the early nations that founded nomadic civilization. Let us follow the good legacy of our ancestors in joining ranks and building our future!’¹¹

The plan to have the Games rotate among countries fell through when Kazakhstan declined the honour of organizing the second edition. Not wanting the initiative to die an early death, Kyrgyzstan’s government decided to organize the event again in 2016 and then also in 2018, at which point it was announced that Turkey would organize the 2020 edition.¹² The president had staked his credibility on making the Games a success,

and thus the summer of 2016 saw tremendous activity, which included the upgrading of potholed roads, the construction of a grand hippodrome and a new sports complex, and the provision of accommodation and facilities for the thousands of participants and invited guests. Compared with the relatively modest try-out in 2014 when 568 athletes from 19 countries participated, the subsequent editions of 2016 and 2018 were much larger, hosting, respectively, 1,200 and 1,976 competitors from, respectively, 62 and 74 countries, with significant representation from most former Soviet Republics, as well as China, Hungary, Turkey, Afghanistan, and the United States, amongst others (Maksüdünov 2020: 587).

These feats had been achieved through a governmental injection of 30.5 and 67.5 million US dollars in 2016 and 2018, respectively, which had paid for the construction of a new hippodrome, the upgrading of roads, and additional infrastructural improvements (Maksüdünov 2020: 587–588).¹³ Apart from the funds provided by the government, there were many other contributors. Of the various sponsors, Russian energy company Gazprom had been the largest. In 2016, it had constructed and donated an arena for indoor sports. Moreover, it had brought in a television crew capable of producing live coverage of the most popular games, which were broadcast in Kyrgyzstan as well as Russia. Different from sponsors, many of the local ‘partners’ had been summoned to make appropriate contributions. Although the specifics remained unclear, virtually all holiday resorts along the northern shore of Lake Issyk Kul agreed to host, free of charge, dozens or even hundreds of guests. Moreover, all local municipalities in the region, and regional administrations from further afield, had been ordered to contribute to the Games by setting up fully equipped yurt camps to host guests and take part in various cultural contests.¹⁴ Acquainted municipality workers complained to me about the sacrifices expected from them and expressed scepticism about the use of state funds for organizing a grand spectacle when most public services lacked adequate funding. But they also spoke in amazement about the renovated roads and newly constructed buildings. In the words of one administrator, after he had returned from a visit to Cholpon Ata, which was being prepared for the opening of the Nomad Games: ‘It is as if you enter a different country!’

Speaking during the main opening ceremony in the new hippodrome in Cholpon Ata in 2016, president Atambaev announced that in the context of globalization, ‘unique cultures and peoples risk disappearing’. He warned that we forget history at our own peril and emphasized the values of nomadic ways of life in an age of environmental destruction. What is so important about the World Nomad Games, he continued, is that because of it ‘the entire world is now learning about the history of nomads’ (*Vechernyi Bishkek* 3 September 2016). This central message had evolved by 2018. When I asked the secretary general of the Games about its new slogan ‘United in strength, united in spirit’, he explained that it referred to a larger vision:

So that in the 21st century, we don't end up being a generation of idiots; idiots who are [glued to] their computers and don't know how to communicate with actual people ... we shouldn't forget that we are human, that we have a history; we shouldn't forget our traditions.

The idea was dramatically performed at the opening ceremony, during an interlude when the hundreds of dancers and musicians who had populated the stage suddenly disappeared to make room for a single, lonely person. The colourful lights had turned monochrome, dramatizing the loneliness of the single person, who was standing in the middle of what appeared to be an endless desert or wasteland, hooked to phone and computer, but completely disoriented and lost. This sense of disorientation could, however, be reversed. As the subsequent musical and dance performances convincingly showed, the cure lay in returning to the roots of Civilisation, to nomadism with its organic connection to nature, as exemplified by Kyrgyzstan's traditions.

Seen from this perspective, the World Nomad Games are an attempt to counteract the perceived homogenizing effects of globalization and modernity. In the field of sport, the adversary is the modern Olympics, which prides itself on creating a level playing field in which individuals (and countries) can test their skills and strengths, but whose structures (and European roots) end up reproducing global asymmetries. Not only does it favour large and rich countries as evidenced by the Olympics medal count, but it marginalizes sport traditions that are not part of the Olympic menu. Kyrgyzstan is not the only country where there is frustration with the Olympics. The role of Turkey, especially after its own Olympic bids were repeatedly rejected,¹⁵ has regionally been particularly significant. It has promoted various alternative international sport events and reportedly took on a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan's organizational expenses for the World Nomad Games, as this 'became the main event of Asian anti-Olympians' (Kylasov 2019: 7). Within this larger anti-Olympic movement, there is a distinct emphasis on ethnic variation, historical roots and, indeed, cultural uniqueness.¹⁶

In practice, however, the critique of asymmetry was blunted by the desire for international recognition. To gain such recognition, the organizers of the World Nomad Games agreed to the regulation and standardization of its various sports, a process that potentially undermined the claim to uniqueness. The issue extends beyond that of receiving formal recognition from international (sport) organizations; it is also about gaining resonance with larger audiences. In essence, celebrating tradition on a grand scale requires such celebrations to be cast in recognizable form. This process is so common that some compromises went virtually unnoticed. For example, there is no reason to assume that all nomadic groups identify with a nation state. But the idea of 'national teams' has become such an integral part of large-scale sports events, that during the opening ceremony very few people in the audience seemed to notice that all participating men and women walked behind the flag of their designated country.¹⁷ Having national teams,

it appeared, was an accepted and necessary ingredient to be seen as a worthy inter-national event.

In view of the above, it will be no surprise that organizers and residents were preoccupied with how the Games were seen by foreigners. To them, it may have been reassuring when a major Kyrgyz newspaper headlined: ‘Two billion people came to know about the Nomad Games’, and went on to say that not only was two billion a conservative estimate, but also that ‘99% of those who saw the Games were overwhelmingly impressed and astonished by what they saw’ (*Megapolis*, 9 September 2016). Another newspaper stated that with the World Nomad Games the country had crossed the Rubicon, to have become an acknowledged member of the international community (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 9 September 2016). It thus appeared that the female villager, who before the start of the Games confided in me, ‘I just hope that we will live up to international standards’, no longer needed to worry. The prospect of living up to international standards did, however, raise the question of what was lost in this ‘living up to standards’, thereby once again pointing to the tension that is at the heart of this chapter, and which requires further unpacking.

Projecting uniqueness and seeking recognition

The most popular team sport in Kyrgyzstan, by far, is *kok boru*. It is played in and between villages on special occasions as well as in a national competition between regional teams, drawing large crowds. It was also the biggest event of the WNG, with each match being watched by thousands of mostly male spectators, and the hippodrome completely packed for the semi-finals and finals. The basic rules of the game are rather straightforward. It involves two teams of four horsemen each, who compete for possession of a goat carcass, which they then need to throw into the opponent’s goal. It is a true spectator sport with tremendous action: the struggle for the goat carcass, the speed horse racing while escaping and chasing opponents, the team strategies to open or block paths, and all of this laced with frequent accidents that include falling horses and catapulted men. As a seventy-five-year-old ‘officially invited’ Kyrgyz man put it when he was asked what he enjoyed best at the WNG:

I am especially captivated by *kok boru*; men on horses, they wrestle, show each other their strength, their bravery, their skills. It is a very dangerous game. [In that sense it is] like hockey and boxing. But [additionally] it shows that man and the environment/nature are one;¹⁸ that it is necessary to befriend nature, to live with nature.

Judged by his reflections on environmental harmony, this elderly gentleman (and former coalmine director) was well steeped in the official WNG discourse. The same ideas of ‘wildness’ and ‘purity’ also surfaced in less

diplomatic assertions, such as this one by a male denizen after one of the Kyrgyz team's victories:

People talk about Genghis Khan, but if you look, you'll see that the Mongolians don't know how to properly ride a horse. Only the Kyrgyz know how to, because of the mountains [which require special riding skills]¹⁹. ... If there hadn't been tanks, then the Kyrgyz would have knocked everyone down.

Though the Kyrgyz men I spoke with were in broad agreement about the unique qualities of the game, some commented that the team version of *kok boru* was a watered-down version of the 'original' game. In that version, there are no spectators and no teams, but dozens if not hundreds of men on horses who to greater or lesser degree participate in the attempt to grab the goat and run off with it to put it in a designated spot (this version is also referred to as *ulak tartysh*, literally 'goat grabbing'). Part of the excitement is that everyone attending the game is somehow involved, manoeuvring their horses in line with the rhythms of the game and seeking out opportunities, even if it is only a handful of strong and devoted participants who are likely to win the game. Masculinity and virility are at centre stage. As a player put it:

Especially when you are inside the crowd, it is *azart* [exciting], trying to grab the carcass. It is really a test. When I play I don't pay attention to anything besides grabbing the goat. People don't feel it when they are hurt. They lose themselves in the game, they lose their mind. It's really crazy.

(quoted in de Boer 2016: 22)

This version of *kok boru* has only two basic rules (one concerns the weight of the goat, and the other having a fixed spot where the goat needs to be delivered), with no restrictions in terms of field size, number or age of participants, or even time duration. My acquaintances often emphasized this virtual absence of rules in the 'original game', as to them it indicated the game's roughness and underlined the skill and bravery of its participants.

The team version of *kok boru* was not a new invention – in some regions of Kyrgyzstan it had been played all along – but it was popularized and became standardized under the direction of the Kök Börü Federation, which was founded in 1994 as part of the post-independence emphasis on national traditions. As De Boer describes in her thesis (2016), the responses to the increasing institutionalization of *kok boru* have been mixed. Some of her informants regretted that it had become less manly, precisely because it was more regulated, whereas others emphasized that the added element of group tactics made the game more interesting to watch. During the Nomad Games I heard some grumbling about further regulations, including the wearing of helmets and the playing time of three periods of twenty minutes.

The adjustments were not only needed to turn *kok boru* into a spectator sport, one that could be watched in a stadium and broadcasted on television, but also to produce a playing field in which the strengths and skills of teams from various regions and countries could be tested. In this sense, the adjustments also offered a route back to uniqueness, now through active comparison. Instead of the *comparare* logic of comparison (with its link to integrity), this route followed the *compeer* logic, which would ideally reveal that no other team was of ‘comparable standing’. Indeed, the ‘incomparable’ superiority of the Kyrgyz team could only be demonstrated through comparison with other teams, preferably by being compared with as many foreign teams as possible. Although never explicitly stated, this is probably what was behind the invitation of *kok boru* teams from unusual places such as France and the United States. Nevertheless, inviting such foreign teams produced new tensions. This was brought to my attention in relation to a different branch of sport, when the captain of the German wrestling team told me: ‘the only reason that we are invited, is so that we give their [the Kyrgyz] victory cachet’. His statement was partly made in jest, but there was a serious undertone when he added: ‘They want us to join, but they don’t want us to win’.²⁰

With *kok boru*, the stakes were particularly high, as this was deemed to be a uniquely Central Asian sport, which according to many denizens ‘only the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs can play well’. Several of the other teams were ‘genuine’, such as the Uzbek, Tatar, and the Moscow-region team (made up of Kyrgyz migrants to Russia). But some of the other teams, including the poorly performing French and the U.S. teams, appeared to exist purely for the purpose of enhancing the Nomad Games’ international profile. In fact, the teams that came from further afield, such as the U.S. team, were not playing on their own horses, something that minimized their chances of success. Scott Zimmerman, captain of the U.S. team, took the invitation by the WNG committee in 2018 (second time in a row) as a sign of appreciation. He attributed the invitation, in part, to the nomadic vibe of his team, which consisted of self-styled cowboys (dressed in fitting attire) from Wyoming. What also might have helped is that Scott went along with the logic of Kyrgyz superiority, at least during camera-facing interviews, such as when he told me in one such interview:

We would love to win, that’s the goal in any competition, but the common understanding is that we are 2,000 years behind these Central Asian cultures at this game. Our expectation is not to win – it is to have a good time, and to show our respect for these cultures.

Scott’s well-rehearsed statement was insightful. For one, it suggested that the projection of uniqueness was not necessarily doomed to fail. Rather, it worked for as long as those who were drawn into the event, such as Scott Zimmerman, acknowledged and respected the special nature of the

Kyrgyz, and of the World Nomad Games. But while his cultural explanation preserved the ‘integrity’ aspect of recognition, it put the ‘superiority’ aspect in quotation marks. After all, it is unlikely that Zimmerman would use his cultural logic to explain success and failure in certain other competitions, such as the Olympics.

Let me bring this section to a close by briefly reflecting on the point that the projection of uniqueness involves a form of reaching out that requires the unique element to be made commensurate. *Kok Boru* had to be cast as a ‘recognizable type’, because ‘people recognize actions and identities in terms of things of which they *already* have some understanding’ (Keane 1997: 14). There are two obvious tensions. By making the game recognizable, a spectator sport, it may lose its distinctive qualities to the extent that those wanting recognition don’t recognize themselves in it anymore. And by actively drawing others into the spectacle (with the understanding that those others are not supposed to win) there is the risk that it will become seen as a farce, as a ‘mere’ performative act, thereby undermining the claim to superiority. Still, judging by the excitement of the tremendous crowds attending the *kok boru* finals between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek team on the closing day of the Games, and the elation when the Kyrgyz team made one goal after the other and convincingly won (with 32 to 9), a temporary balance had been found.

Seeking uniqueness and recognizing it

Acting as an accredited media representative in 2018 – I was the fixer and interpreter for a Dutch TV journalist for three days – turned out to be worthwhile. I had already started my fieldwork on the Nomad Games but decided to take the five-hour bus ride back to the international airport near Bishkek to observe (and experience) how foreign journalists arrived at the Games. It didn’t disappoint. The WNG welcoming party was slightly confused when I wasn’t on the same flight as my ‘colleague’, but once he was guided through the customs and I joined him, we were treated to refreshments, given an elaborate welcome pack (including a jacket, cap, blanket, water bottle), and then, together with journalists from the New York Times, Tajikistan TV, and several others were transported back to the Issyk Kul region, where we were offered full board accommodation in a luxury resort, free of charge. Although it is not uncommon for NGOs or even governments to facilitate the work of journalists when it is in their interest to receive media coverage, the journalists I spoke to were amazed by the extensive, according to some ‘over the top’, display of hospitality.²¹

It will be obvious that foreign journalists were crucial for turning the Nomad Games into a significant event. In fact, the number of foreign journalists was seen as an important indicator of success, and hence often emphasized in official statements. Reportedly, during the 2018 version, there were ‘over 500 representatives of foreign mass media organizations

from 58 countries, of which there were 50 television channels, 12 radio channels, 48 newspapers, and 50 bloggers'.²² Equally interesting is that so many journalists considered the World Nomad Games to be an event that was worth their while. Among these were globally recognized brands such as the New York Times, Al Jazeera, Associated Press, and BBC Radio (the Guardian was absent in 2018 but had reported on the first two editions of the Games). Far more numerous, and at least as relevant for the discussion here, were the freelance photographers, writers for travel magazines, documentary makers, and travel bloggers. They all came with the expectation of finding something unique, or at least sufficiently different, that could be sold to their respective audiences. There was an interesting tension here, which can be profitably looked at through the lens of authenticity.

One of the many ironies of 'authenticity' is that even though it is supposed to refer only to itself – 'of undisputed origin and not a copy' as mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary – its everyday use relies on a whole series of comparative connotations. As Fillitz and Saris put it, the claim of authenticity always 'presupposes that there is a down market variety of what is on offer' (2013: 1), a variety that is less genuine, pure, traditional, or sincere than the authentic version. Because foreign visitors (media representatives and others) frequently used the term to refer to the World Nomad Games, I asked them what authenticity meant to them. The answers were perhaps unsurprising but nevertheless insightful:

- 'The way people used to live in the past. Actually everything that you see around here' (Belgian male tourist)
- 'Authenticity is about hospitality; that you are invited to eat their food. This is a value that we have lost in Europe' (Swedish female NGO worker)
- 'That they do it for themselves, rather than turning it into a performance' (English female journalist)
- 'That it is really different; you could say exotic; and not as polished as festivals that are set up for tourists' (American female expat)

These brief responses suggest that for these Western observers, authenticity is indeed about 'referring to itself', but they also revealed that this is judged through an Orientalizing gaze that emphasizes temporal and spatial difference. Moreover, the desire to have an 'authentic' experience is perceived to lead to its demise. Lisette, a Dutch visitor, elaborated as follows on the authenticity of the Nomad Games:

It is very pure, the people are still really themselves; there are far fewer tourists; the landscape is wild; yes, it really feels like being in a place that hasn't been discovered yet ... by tourists, by the large masses. ... I do think that this is something that you cannot experience anywhere else in the world.

Lisette had the feeling that she had arrived just in time: 'I think that if you come back here twenty years from now, it will be lost'. And she spoke from experience. She had travelled the world, visiting festivals across Latin America and Africa. But for her, the World Nomad Games stood out.

Some of the reporters, however, were not so sure that the Nomad Games were sufficiently authentic. A journalist for National Geographic (travelling with his colleague) said, 'We don't find it authentic at all. This is clearly meant to preserve the culture, to promote it, a mix of traditional sport and education'. The main problem for them was that their readers look for 'a more authentic experience ... while *this*, it's between authenticity and [an archaeological museum]'. Hence, after having spent a day at the WNG, the two men decided to travel deeper into the mountains, in search of more authentic experiences. Many other journalists, whatever their personal views, found ways to present the WNG as sufficiently different or special to their various audiences. They achieved this by resorting to the technique of zooming in on the exotic and the 'authentic', while excluding from their photographs and stories those elements – Western tourists, other journalists, the slick new sports hall – that would make the Nomad Games resemble other festivals or sport events.²³

The search for uniqueness also revealed a basic miscommunication between foreigners and Kyrgyz, as centred on the concept of authenticity. Although the term exists as a loanword – *avtenticnost'* – it is not widely used. The words that are used instead, such as 'purely' or 'really' Kyrgyz, or 'our customs', do not have the same temporal connotations. The miscommunication was revealed when 'my' journalist asked several Kyrgyz visitors and vendors how authentic the various items sold on the Ethno Bazar were. After I had translated the question into 'purely' Kyrgyz, respondents insisted that *of course* these products were genuinely Kyrgyz. One man picked up a miniature handmade *shyrdak* (felt carpet) and explained: 'this is a traditional Kyrgyz design; we make it as we do; sure, we made it smaller so that tourists can easily transport it, but that doesn't mean that it isn't purely Kyrgyz'. While the foreign gaze judged 'uniqueness' through the othering register of authenticity, 'uniqueness' from a Kyrgyz perspective was about reproducing, and displaying their traditions in the present moment, and presenting these to the world. This outwardly oriented display was exactly what the Western search for authenticity tried to avoid or deny.

This section discussed how foreigners were attracted by and engaged with difference, as reflected in the image of 'Games' that were wilder than the Olympics, of a culture not usually visited by western tourists, of an event that felt to belong to the past and was staged not for tourists but organized for 'the people'. The attraction of difference reflects MacCannell's (1976) classic characterization of tourism as a quest for authenticity, in which value is placed on purity, originality, and genuineness. Whether or not the desire for authenticity constitutes an 'impossible quest' (Bruner 2001: 898), its contradictory features suggest that it is based on a fantasy (Knudsen, Rickly,

and Vidon 2016) and as such cannot help but continue to circle around the ‘real’ (van de Port and Meyer 2018). Even so, it derives value from that circulation. Given that ‘authenticity is, in a sense, in the eye of the beholder’ (Garland and Gordon 1999: 280), it depends on a deliberate process of editing and curating, as seen in the selective attention of journalists, and the creativity of other foreigners in imagining their object. This process of curation produced an object that was rather different from that which was seen by Kyrgyz people. This disconnect ironically enabled mutual appreciation between foreigners and Kyrgyz (cf. Mair and Evans 2015), even if it also prevented genuine recognition to be realized.

Recognition, by comparison

For people situated on the margins, the quest for recognition is riddled with tensions. To attract attention, they need to project difference, but to be taken seriously requires conforming to standards. This last section examines the intersection of these centrifugal and centripetal forces. It does so through two concrete examples that successively illuminate the ‘integrity’ and the ‘standing’ dimension of recognition, as related to the *comparare* and *compeer* modes of comparison.

Foreign reporter: ‘The fact that a dead goat is involved, does that make it extra authentic?’

Foreign tourist: ‘Yes, that does make it extra authentic, absolutely. Those are the things that are really different; and it is a different culture, so I simply accept that’. (recorded 7/9/2018)

Scott Zimmerman, the captain of the U.S. *kok boru* team, ‘does not expect the sport to get picked up by the Olympics any time soon’.

New York Times reporter: ‘Why not?’

Scott: ‘We use a dead goat’ (*The New York Times*, 15/9/2018)

Anthropologist in reporter mode: ‘Why is it that you use a dead goat for kok boru?’

Male Kyrgyz denizen: ‘Because a goat is very sturdy, much sturdier than a sheep. A sheep’s skin would simply tear open’. (recorded 8/9/2018)

Goat carcasses clearly capture the foreign gaze, making *kok boru* (and by extension the WNG) authentic to outsiders, while also opening it up to potential ridicule and critique. For the quoted Kyrgyz villager, by contrast, dead goats hardly mattered. It was just that their weight and consistency – being sturdier than sheep – made goats useful objects to play with. These contrasting perspectives were neither monolithic nor immune to each other, and so it will be useful to unpack them.

Though less evocatively than the sturdy-goat-quote, several other Kyrgyz villagers similarly took the goats for granted, saying that this was simply the way *kok boru* had always been played.²⁴ But in other Kyrgyz circles, there was awareness of the foreign sensitivity to goat carcasses. In fact, the country's successful 2017 bid to have *kok boru* inscribed in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage had stated in writing that 'nowadays, the goat's carcass is replaced by a moulage' and featured a video which explained that this was done out of respect for other cultures.²⁵ This was a message tailored to a UNESCO audience; very different from how the WNG audience was engaged. No matter how the decision to play with actual goat carcasses at the Nomad Games was reached, it clearly spoke to the foreign fascination with wildness, difference, and authenticity. It was also in this spirit that a Kyrgyz official repeated the following meme at the start of the *kok boru* competition: 'If Genghis Khan were alive, he'd be here' (see Putz 2016).

As we have seen, most foreigners responded positively to the message of wildness and authenticity, while at the same time being aware of goat carcass sensitivities. The tension was evident in the quoted *New York Times* dialogue, which anticipated an international backlash. It is interesting, though, that such a critique never gained momentum. I managed to track down one online petition set up by an animal rights groups, but it gathered only 3,712 signatures over three years.²⁶ Another potential line of critique could have focused on the Nomad Games' blatant celebration of masculinity and the underrepresentation of women in many of the sports. Kyrgyzstani scholars Kim and Molchanova, for example, criticize the WNG for failing to 'decolonize' local women and for asserting a new patriarchal ideology (2018). But this message was lost on foreign reporters, possibly because their expectations of Central Asia were such that they were favourably impressed by the relatively vocal role of women during the Games. There also appeared to be little appetite among journalists to criticise a peripheral country (one which had so generously hosted them), and so they resorted instead to the kind of neutralizing logic that I quoted above: 'it is a different culture, so I simply accept that'.²⁷

Kyrgyzstan's quest for recognition took place 'under the evaluating gaze of a wider world' (Keane 1997: 14, 17). It projected an image of difference and uniqueness, but the outcome of the resulting politically laden and evaluative interactions was anything but certain. Rather, it was at this intersection of projection and reception that lines of integrity, compromise, and critique were provisionally drawn and redrawn. Emphasizing uniqueness and incomparability was a way of taming external evaluations, giving breathing space to the celebration of culture, while counterbalancing criticism and ridicule. However, while assertions of uniqueness were thus relatively successful, they inadvertently triggered paternalizing attitudes and revealed the fragility of recognition.

The projection of difference helped to attract attention, but some conformism was required to ensure this attention would be respectful. The

implied tensions were especially clear in Kyrgyzstan's effort to move beyond cultural celebration and assert its superiority in the field of sport. That is, claims of 'incomparability' did not only project difference, but also superior standing. And this, as noted, could only be demonstrated through active comparison. A good illustration of this principle was in the counting of medals for each sport, which culminated in the final WNG medal table (See <http://worldnomadgames.com/en/medals/>).

The first point to emphasize is that there is nothing special about the way in which this medal table is composed. As such, it is 'instantly recognizable' as a medal table. In line with common practice in most modern sports, the medals are divided into gold, silver, and bronze. Moreover, medallists are categorized by country, rather than nomadic tribe or group, or regional affiliation. As such the table reflects the pull towards standardization. But what also stands out is the unusual ranking. Despite being represented by significant numbers of athletes, the largest sport nations – the United States and China – rank twenty-third and fourteenth, respectively. By contrast, the most prominent positions were occupied by countries that hardly feature in the Olympics. Kyrgyzstan proudly on top, followed by other Central Asian countries (as well as Russia), then Hungary and Iran.

To many Kyrgyz in the audience, the table demonstrated the superiority of nomadic culture. It was an obviously attractive message, as reflected in the high frequency with which this table was displayed on national television channels. Most foreigners however – athletes, journalists, and tourists alike – remained unconvinced. Some voiced suspicion of manipulation or corruption, others pointed out that the 'playing field' was uneven and unduly benefited Kyrgyz players. A German archer insisted: 'The only reason we are here is to allow the Kyrgyz to give their victories legitimacy, to show that they are the best', not just of five neighbouring countries, but of all eighty or so participating countries. Obviously, the presence of foreign athletes was required to turn the event into the *World Nomad Games*. Such sceptical attitudes revealed that the assertion of dominance had the potential to backfire and did not produce the *genuine* recognition that was so desired.

As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, frustration with the Olympics had been a motivation for organising the *World Nomad Games*. Indeed, the Games embodied a challenge to a hegemonic comparative framework that was rightly seen to reproduce inequalities. But rather than displacing the framework, the WNG selectively borrowed elements from it and integrated these into an alternative framework, which generated new inequalities. Nevertheless, I suggest that the challenge was valuable in and of itself, because it made visible (to those who cared to look) that terms of comparison are never neutral, even (or especially) when they are presented as such. The resentment of peripheral groups towards mainstream international competitions is not just understandable but sometimes justified.

In these final paragraphs, I return to this chapter's title, and central theme, of 'recognizing uniqueness'. We saw how the WNG were created with the aim

to claim a spot on the global stage, while drawing attention to the country's cultural traditions. Significantly, the projection of cultural uniqueness resonated with foreign visitors in search of unique experiences. Perceptions about the 'unique object' certainly differed, but as long as these differences were left untranslated, mutual appreciation developed. Foreign visitors were positively disposed towards the Games' unusual features and the hospitable and organic atmosphere, and Kyrgyz denizens enjoyed the competitions and performances, as well as the unprecedented foreign interest in their cultural practices and sport traditions. Still, various pressures pushed towards explicating these differences: the Kyrgyz sought evidence of recognition against a global scoreboard; visitors turned their 'authentic experience' into exoticized representations. This raised the stakes of comparison, resulting in a situation in which comparability was denied by those whose claims depended on comparative acts.

The implied vagaries of recognition were illuminated by dissecting the modes of (non-)comparison involved and differentiating between the *comparare* and a *compeer* modes. When foreigners emphasized difference and authenticity, they used the *comparare* mode, which resonated with the Kyrgyz desire to celebrate the uniqueness of Kyrgyz culture. The denial of this type of comparability emphasized difference, thereby counteracting the 'prickliness' of comparison and safeguarding the integrity of the recognized object. But the quest for recognition also entailed a desire for status and standing, which resonated with the *compeer* mode of comparison and was especially visible in competitions. For the Kyrgyz athletes and their supporters, the WNG was an opportunity to claim their spot on the world stage and overcome their experienced marginalization. This required producing evidence of superiority, something that could only be produced by making differences commensurate. Perhaps unavoidably, this opened the Nomad Games to critique, and prevented Kyrgyz uniqueness from being fully recognized.

Notes

- 1 As I suggested in the introductory chapter, 'the particular is particular only in comparison to something else'.
- 2 The idea here is that after the invention of the gun, Europeans no longer engaged in honest fighting, with the result that they lost their 'manly' qualities of bravery, virility, and mastery.
- 3 I am grateful to Nicholas Long for drawing my attention to these etymological nuances.
- 4 The first recorded uses of the Kyrgyz term for 'comparing' (*salyshtyruu*) were in reference to horses, such as in the phrase 'let the horses compete' (*zhorgo salyshtyr*), which similarly points to the 'testing for equality' meaning. However, as with the Russian and English counterparts, the term is used flexibly in everyday communication, where it can refer not just to standing but also to other similarities and differences.

- 5 In his sweeping analysis, Taylor suggests that when the vertical networks of belonging of medieval society started to be replaced with horizontal ones of the modern nation state, there was a concomitant shift from the value registers of honour and loyalty to those of dignity and equality (1994: 25).
- 6 As circulated on Twitter and Instagram, <http://ift.tt/2bWFr3x>, last accessed 3 April 2021.
- 7 This principle has been widely discussed in regional scholarship; for an insightful analysis see Slezkine (1994).
- 8 I highlight the example of wrestling because the most detailed and convincing analysis of how sport traditions developed in the USSR is by Petrov (2014), who focuses on the emergence of national styles of wrestling.
- 9 Joachim Otto Habeck (2011) makes a related point about the importance of Soviet cultural programmes for inclusive purposes at the local level, arguing that the institution of the House of Culture (*dom kul'tura*) – the locus for communal activities – served to give people a sense of belonging and dignity.
- 10 See Dzenovska (2005) and Fauve (2015) for discussions of nation-branding in the post-Soviet contexts of Latvia and Kazakhstan, respectively.
- 11 As reported by Alisher Khamidov, 14 September 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-hosts-first-world-nomad-games-but-can-they-unite-the-nation>
- 12 In 2018, it was rumoured that Turkey paid a significant sum of money to Kyrgyzstan for this privilege. The 2020 Turkish edition was postponed twice, now scheduled to be held in 2022 in Iznik. In April 2021, Kyrgyzstan's minister of foreign affairs advocated to return the WNG to Kyrgyzstan in 2024. See: <http://en.kabar.kg/news/4th-world-nomad-games-in-turkey-postponed-to-2022/>
- 13 The more modest 2014 edition had come at a cost of only 3 million US dollars. The risen costs were a sensitive issue, and it's probably not a coincidence that when I interviewed Prime Minister Isakov in 2018 he claimed that the total cost was only 4 million, a number also printed in WNG communications.
- 14 This form of outsourcing by decree is very common in Kyrgyzstan and is referred to as a typical 'Soviet way of organizing events'. It usually triggers feelings of resentment, which in this case were particularly strong among those who do not identify with Kyrgyz culture, such as members of the Russian minority.
- 15 Istanbul made bids to host the Olympics in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2020, but did not succeed.
- 16 In challenging these global sport asymmetries, the WNG can be compared to the equally new World Indigenous Games (first held in Brazil in 2015), and the slightly older World Games (for Non-Olympic Sports).
- 17 I should note that in some instances regional variation was expressed. The Buryati and Kalmuks, as well as the *kok boru* team from Wyoming, waved their regional flags, but they were still encompassed within their respective Russian and American national teams (with concomitant flags).
- 18 The man used the Russian word *priroda*, which translates as both environment and nature.
- 19 This is based on the misguided stereotype that Mongolia is a largely flat country.
- 20 A wrestling judge from the Netherlands (born and raised in Chechnya) told me: 'the culture here is that the host should win; that we should help them'. To him, this was typical of sport events in the former USSR.
- 21 My justification for having accepted these benefits is to actually have coproduced a 10-minute television item which was aired during prime time on a main Dutch

- channel – the kind of production that the WNG organization would have appreciated. Readers with knowledge of Dutch can check this out at: <https://een.vandaag.avrotros.nl/item/nederland-scoort-op-world-nomad-games/>
- 22 Adopted from an official hand-out to all journalists on the final day of the Games: ‘III Vsemirnye igry kochevnikov: tsifry i fakty’ [The 3rd World Nomad Games: numbers and facts].
- 23 In the television reportage I coproduced, the ‘authentic’ was found by zooming in on two Dutch wrestlers of Chechen origin, who presented their journey to the World Nomad Games as a sort of homecoming, in which they elaborately commented on those aspects that reminded them of their youth.
- 24 In the more distant past, it may have been played with a wolf (*kok boru* translates as blue/grey wolf) but this is beyond human memory; in any case the game’s village version is often called *ulak tartysh*, or ‘grab the goat’.
- 25 The various documents can be found at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/11b-representative-list-00939>
- 26 <https://forcechange.com/514370/ban-goat-carcass-polo-and-other-cruel-nomad-games-events/>
- 27 An American *kok boru* player expressed the same logic when saying that dead goats are ‘part of the culture that we are here to experience’, adding that the winning team gets to eat the goat (*New York Times* 15/9/18).

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