

Kazakh Homecomings: Between Politics, Culture and Identity

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This article is devoted to contemporary return migrations by Kazakhs – a process of great significance for the population and cultural policies of the government of independent Kazakhstan. I examine the repatriation process of the Kazakh population from the point of view of the cultural transformations of Kazakh society itself, unveiling the intended and unintended effects of these return migrations. The case of the Kazakh returns is a historically unique phenomenon, yet it provides data permitting the formulation of broader generalisations. It illustrates the dual impact of culturally different environments, which leads to a simultaneous preserving and changing of the culture of the new immigrants. The analyses found in this article are based upon data collected during two periods of fieldwork conducted in June–July 2016 and March 2018 at several locations in Kazakhstan and in cooperation with a Kazakh university. The research methodology is anchored in multi-sited, multi-year fieldwork.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; homecoming; repatriation; return migration; adaptation

Introduction

Serving as inspiration to delve into Kazakhian return migrations were previous fieldwork experiences in Kazakhstan and seemingly inconsequential moments in the researcher–researched relationship (Nowicka 2007). Not knowing the Kazakh language, I turn to an elderly inhabitant of Raiymbek, a village some 40 kilometres from Almaty and speak in Russian (an official language in the country). He smiles awkwardly and says something in Kazakh. Entering the conversation is a Kazakh ethnographer who explains that this particular settlement is inhabited primarily by Kazakhs who have come from Mongolia. In like manner the situation repeats itself in other localities to the south as well as in south-eastern Kazakhstan where some individuals are barely able to express themselves in Russian because a part of the family had come from China or other countries.

It was in these homes that, during *Nauryz* (Kazakh New Year) in March of 2018, I met with exceptionally archaic, familial celebrations of the holiday. Traditional Kazakhs living in present-day Kazakhstan but who came from Mongolia and did not understand Russian. This situation was a consequence of the great returns

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– great because, among today’s general population in Kazakhstan, at least 10 per cent are immigrants, returnees and repatriates from various (mainly bordering) Asian countries.

This article is devoted to this specific category of Kazakh citizens as well as to the role they play in the government policies of the sovereign state of Kazakhstan. Additionally, I focus on the problems of the returning migrants’ adaptation under the conditions of a planned process of re-Kazakhisation in the nation-state. Not to be overlooked are also the secondary, unintended effects of repatriation.

The repatriation migrations of the last three decades comprise a process of great meaning for Kazakhstan. The opening sentence of the introduction to a book by Bibiziya K. Kalshabayeva (2015: 14) is symptomatic:

There is no doubt that national integrity is the sole prerequisite for the development of our country. Therefore, in forming the national idea, the main task for the Republic of Kazakhstan is to carry out considerable research into the ethnic history of our compatriots who live abroad.

Return migration is a type of movement deserving of special attention because of its entanglement in the social dynamics of Us and Them, of being familiar or foreign (Schütz 1964). Such migration is also worth examining due to reactions derived from the political interests of the accepting country *vis-à-vis* the interests of the emigrating individual (Nowicka 2008; Nowicka and Firouzbakhch 2008). The case of Kazakh return migrations, spanning over two decades now, provides us with much material of a general nature. The incoming repatriates have taken on a great dimension in Kazakhstan: among today’s general population at least 10 per cent are newcomers – mostly return migrants. This phenomenon gives rise to reflection and enhances theoretical deliberations on the issue of return migration in Poland, in Europe or in the world.

The aim of the text at hand is to look at these Kazakh homecomings from two perspectives: 1) the goals and intentions of the Kazakhstan government as expressed in official repatriation policies and 2) the cultural transformation of Kazakh society itself as an effect of the repatriation process. Here I focus on the changes seeping into the dominant society as it responds to (*inter alia*) ‘model Kazakhness’ – a purer form preserved by isolation within an alien ethnic environment. The Kazakh case illustrates the dual influence of living in an emigrant milieu: this condition both changes and conserves the migrants’ culture.

Commencing this investigation, I assumed the classic anthropological approach of fieldwork – collecting and verifying material on the basis of data triangulation. The primary sources included: 1) the responses of my Kazakh interlocutors, 2) legal documents on the subject of Kazakh return migration and 3) observation of the performed relations between the autochthonous and repatriated Kazakhs. Especially interesting was behaviour signaling attitudes and emotions.

Overall, a total of 23 interviews were conducted with repatriated Kazakh migrants and their families; 15 interviews on the subject of return migration were conducted with local, nonmigrants and four observations of contacts between ‘natives’ and ‘newcomers’ were recorded. This fieldwork was conducted in cooperation with a university in Kazakhstan – I was a guest of the Department of Archaeology and Ethnology and at the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Astana. Between 20 June and 20 July 2016 I took part in a summer research fieldtrip near Toktamis in the Abay district of the East Kazakhstan region. During my second stay, between 12 and 27 March 2018 – precisely during the period of preparations and celebrations for *Nauryz* – I conducted research in Atyrau and then in the Alatau district of Almaty, as well as in various localities in the area of Uzynagash, the administrative centre of the Zhambyl district in the Almaty region of south-eastern Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan and the Kazakhs: cultural and demographic context

The idea of home, the hometown or the fatherland is uniquely shaped in a society that is, to a great extent, territorially mobile. Historically speaking as well as contemporaneously (to some degree), Kazakhs comprise a nation with a culture anchored in the value system of nomadic, shepherding societies. This does not at all mean that the current majority of the country's inhabitants lead such a lifestyle, yet numerous traits remain in the Kazakh culture which warrant such a description. Nomadism and the customs associated with it – including important holidays and festivities which Soviet regimes were incapable of uprooting – are part and parcel of the entire cultural whole.

Nomadic life has always demanded particular kinds of behaviour – mutual assistance, hospitality and reciprocated support, although people are scattered – and hardiness under severe climatic conditions. Temperatures here can vary from deep frosts and snowstorms to heatwaves accompanied by abrupt shifts in humidity. The demanding natural environment and climate – together with the cultural patterns associated with traditional nomadism and shepherding – have left a keen imprint upon the remigration process among Kazakhs (Edmunds 1998).

In order to comprehend the social phenomena taking place over the last few decades in Kazakhstan – including the essence of the demographic and cultural policies of the government – one needs to consider its fundamental geographic and geopolitical characteristics (Sejdimbek 2012). The expanse of the territory stretches 2 724 900 square metres and yet, according to the latest census (2018), there are only 18 157 078 inhabitants, which means that the population density is relatively low. At the same time, Kazakhstan shares, geopolitically, some 12 187 kilometres of borders with its neighbours – the Russian Federation (6 467 km), Uzbekistan (2 300 km), China (1 460 km), Kirghizstan (980 km) and Turkmenistan (380 km).

In its current territorial and political shape, the Republic of Kazakhstan has existed for a little over a quarter of a century. The moment at which it became a sovereign state is usually considered the Declaration of Independence announced on 25 October 1995. However, a constitution for the autonomous Kazakhstan had already been passed on 16 December 1991 and, by 21 December, the Republic of Kazakhstan had been accepted into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Furthermore, five days later, the country's independence had been recognised by the outgoing USSR.

Still, the new nation-state had to face (and, to some extent, is still facing) numerous social problems – among them those connected with a cultural coherence. In fact, the most significant dilemma is familiarity with and fluency in the Kazakh language among the country's inhabitants. As the 2009 census illustrated, 74 per cent of the population declared having an understanding of Kazakh while only 62 per cent declared actual fluency. That same census showed a larger percentage of the mostly bilingual population declaring some knowledge of Russian (85 per cent, including 80 per cent of the Kazakhs themselves) („Demographics of Kazakhstan”, Wikipedia 2019).

In recent decades, Kazakhstan has experienced serious demographic transformations. Actually, such phenomena are not new to this territory; population movements have been occurring for centuries whereas rapid demographic shifts have characterised the entire history of the Kazakhs. As a result of a massive immigration of Slavs onto this territory, the Kazakhs themselves became a minority in their homeland by the eighteenth century. This situation lasted for the next few years although, in 1897, Kazakhs comprised 82.5 per cent and the Russians 10.9 per cent of the inhabitants overall. Consequently, Marek Gawęcki (2007: 127) dubbed the Russian-language segment of the Kazakhstan population ‘the fourth *zhuz*’ – a tribal unit in the traditional structure of Kazakh society.

By the time of the 1959 census, the number of Russian residents in Kazakhstan superseded the number of Kazakhs in the republic. It was not until 1989 that the Kazakhs barely overtook the Russians, even if the former

continued to be a minority when compared to all the other national groups taken together. As Olga Davydenko (2011: 23) wrote that 'in 1989 the Kazakh portion of the general population did not exceed 40 per cent (6 564 000); Russians constituted not much smaller a national group at 38 per cent (6 228 000), while representatives of other nations constituted 22 per cent' (see also Sadowskaja 2001). Towards the end of the Soviet Union's *perestroika* era, demographic changes were beginning: soon there would be a sudden outflow of non-Kazakhs, primarily the Russians.

The progressive changes in the ethnic make-up of the Kazakhstan population took place as a consequence of migratory processes. On the one hand, there were emigrations of non-Kazakh peoples while, on the other, there were immigrations (actually, returns) of Kazakhs from other countries back to Kazakhstan. As a result of these population movements, the proportions in the ethnic composition of the country quickly tipped in favour of the Kazakh population (Aleksejenko 2006).

Nonetheless, one of the characteristic traits of the territorial distribution of the Kazakh people is precisely their dispersal: according to current data, about 4 million Kazakhs live outside the Republic of Kazakhstan. Inhabiting Uzbekistan are about 1 500 Kazakhs; similar is the count in China, while Russia houses about 1 million. In Turkmenistan there are about 100 000 Kazakhs, in Mongolia 80 000 and, in Kirghizstan, 45 000. According to the third Great Kurultáj (a traditional gathering of Kazakhs), other countries such as Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan are occupied by smaller, more concentrated groups (<http://nomad.su/?a=3-200509300128>). The largest percentage of Kazakhs living beyond the borders of their homeland are the descendants of emigrants from the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s – runaways from repression, collectivisation and hunger. It is thought that about 200 000 Kazakhs abandoned the Soviet Union in favour of life in China, Mongolia, India, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey (see ru.wikipedia.org). Noted in the 1930s, however, was an increase of about 800 000 Kazakhs in these countries.

The Kazakh migrations in this period also bore an internal affairs dimension which – once Kazakhstan had achieved independence, tearing away first from the USSR and then from the Russian Federation – led to the Kazakhs finding themselves in separate nation-states. After all, many had escaped from their homeland to other republics of the former Soviet Union: between 1926 and 1930, the number of Kazakhs on the territories of other republics increased by 2.5 per cent or by more than 794 000. The exodus was of a political-economic nature, motivated by a fear of collectivisation and the Soviet-regime authorities (Kalshabayeva 2015).

Furthermore, the demographic transformation over the course of the last two decades has also been linked to both emigration and immigration factors which are functioning within Kazakhstan. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, a significant contingent of Russian-speaking, non-Kazakh nationals vacated the republic; various estimates are given for this wave but it ranges from a few hundred thousand to a few million. In fact, as of 1993, there was a radical drop in Kazakhstan's general population – dropping from 16 986 000 to 14 800 000 by 2001. It should be noted that this process had started earlier: between 1989 and 1999 the number of inhabitants decreased from 16 199 000 to 14 953 000. Over ten years, some 1.246 million people had left the country; some sources even approximate three million.

Nevertheless, since 2001, there has been a gradual increase in the country's population as a result of a rapid rise in the birth rate as well as the immigration of ethnic Kazakhs, back from other countries to Kazakhstan. According to the Agency of Demographics and Migrations, between 1991 and 1999, 43 000 Kazakh families (over 181 000 individuals) repatriated. Among them, 106 500 (roughly 60 per cent) came from the CIS (primarily from Russia and Uzbekistan), 64 000 from Mongolia and the remainder from Iran, Turkey, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Davydenko 2011). It was already at the beginning of the 1990s that Kazakhs began to return from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China, Mongolia, Iran and Turkey. Between 1991 and 2015, some 953 908 Kazakhs returned: 61.5 per cent from Uzbekistan, 14.3 per cent from China, 9.3 per cent from Mongolia, 6.8 per cent from Turkmenistan, 4.6 per cent from Russia and 3.5 per cent from other countries.

In summary, although data details vary from source to source, official statistics covering the 25 years between 1991 and 2016 show nearly one million persons returning to Kazakhstan. These statistics include neither the children born within the country nor those whose migration transpired without any state assistance and without registration as repatriates. If these categories are also included, then the total exceeds one million – that is, 10 per cent of the Kazakh population in Kazakhstan. The process of remigration to Kazakhstan from various countries is a constant one, lasting to this day. The latest data show that, in 2017 alone, 159 Kazakhs returned from Uzbekistan, 28 from China, seven from Russia, and one each from Moldova, Turkey and Turkmenistan.

Government ethnic policies

As Chazanow (2018: 29) stated, after the collapse of the USSR, the soviet authorities of the republic immediately rejected the communist ideology, replacing it with a national one. The new policy did not assume a civism but rather an ethno-nationalism based upon a national movement of the *ethnos*.

Undertaking the topic of how and what official decisions are made in Kazakhstan, we need to seek clarity about the political and social structure of the country. On the one hand, the country is ruled centrally and resolutions are passed vertically from the top down (see Chazanow 2018; Golam 2013; Shukuralieva 2012). On the other, we cannot ignore the elements of traditional structure: divisions into the three supra-tribal *zhuzes* or tribes, sub-tribes and clans.

The soviet period weakened and, to some degree, violated elements of the pre-soviet sociopolitical structures of Kazakh society; nevertheless, it was not completely successful in dismantling it (Chazanow 2018). The presidential form of government is essentially a guarantee of state uniformity and consistency; its aim is to forestall potential decentralist tendencies in a young, nationally and religiously diverse republic. In 2009, however, the powers of the lower levels of government were expanded (see Bisztyga 2014). The centralised social (including the demographic) policy of President *Nursultan Nazarbayev* and his followers has been focused, first and foremost, on the Kazakhisation of the country's population – above all, this entails cultural Kazakhisation, especially linguistic.

In fact, the official language of the country is Kazakh, although Russian formally possesses equal status. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Russian language holds the status of a second official language. Article 7 of that document asserts in paragraph 1 that 'The state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan shall be the Kazak language'. Yet the next paragraph notes that 'In state institutions and local self-administrative bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazak language' (Constituteproject.org 2019). Moreover, paragraph 3 proclaims acceptance of the languages of all the nations inhabiting the republic: 'The state shall promote conditions for the study and development of the languages of the people of Kazakhstan'.

Generally, the Russian language is used on a par with the Kazakh language in state organisations and local government agencies. Nevertheless, an authoritative order has decreed that at least 50 per cent of all radio and television programming be broadcast in Kazakh. Moreover, the names of various localities, towns, and cities are being rendered more traditionally Kazakh; some names are associated with Kazakh heroes, others with significant events in Kazakh history. This mother tongue has also been more strongly introduced into public life – particularly in state administration at all levels, including the local – because forms are printed solely in Kazakh. The Kazakhisation has affected education as well – there is a clear decrease in the number of hours dedicated to the teaching of Russian and in the number of schools in which Russian was the teaching language.

Somewhat paradoxically, this policy is part and parcel of a broader plan to maintain a semblance of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism. Those concepts are presented as a rebuttal to the constant accusations of nationalism from the Russian-speaking segment of society as well as from the potent and powerful Russian neighbour. Therefore, multiculturalism is also underscored alongside Kazakh patriotism. There is a cult of international values which, overall, offers some sort of ideological whole, albeit self-contradictory.

Officially the country is multinational and based upon a friendship among all the many nations which have always lived on these lands. This official policy manifests itself in state promotional materials, at the most important public events and in the content communicated by the mass media. Yet accompanying this, at every step, is an underscoring of the dominant value of the titular nation – the primeval value of the ‘native’ overriding those values described as ‘non-native’. Serving to assuage any incongruities is an emphasis on information (previously hidden, undermined or derided) regarding the praiseworthy history and steppe life of the Kazakhs.

The leaders of Kazakhstan are attempting to form an ethnically Kazakh state, trying to compensate for the Russian-speaking population, who started to leave in the 1990s. Actually, many of the non-Kazakh population had found themselves within the republic’s borders not of their own accord: some were workers ordered to move and bring ‘civilization’ to an ‘economically backward’ region, while others had been banished to this periphery under Stalinism. In truth, outside Siberia, it was Kazakhstan that was the most frequent destination to which people were deported and, hence, finding themselves here were various national groups (Koreans, Germans, Poles, etc.) (Diener 2006) as well as numerous stateless and other groups – Karacheyevs, Kalmyks, Chechnyans, Ingushians, Balkarans, Tatars, Kurds, Bulgarians, Greeks, Turks, etc. (see Gawęcki 2007: 127 ff.).

The fundamental difference – one not verbalised but, rather, expressed in the actions taken by contemporary politicians in Kazakhstan – divides the citizens of the country into the native Kazakhs and the non-native immigrant population (meaning everyone else and particularly the Russian-speakers). Nevertheless, the language criterion is imprecise in practice because some of the ethnic Kazakhs do not speak Kazakh or speak it poorly and thus use Russian on a daily basis. Tensions ride high with regards to this issue. The attitude of the ethnically non-Kazakh, Russian-speaking minority is expressed well by Olga Davydenko (2011: 21):

The nonindigenous population (regardless of how many generations have lived in Kazakhstan) is subject to discrimination. Their access to certain public resources – such as higher education at the elite institutions in the country and prestigious professional employment – is limited.

It is true that Davydenko does assert that loyalty to the state (and above all to its current government) does assure citizens of equal treatment, yet the message underlying her text is univocally critical.

Repatriation as state policy

The politics of President (until March 2019) *Nursultan Nazarbayev* concentrated on the construction of a homogenous Kazakh society focused upon a shared culture, axiology and national pride. Still, a further aim of state policies has been the realisation of an idea to integrate the Euro-Asian continent, with the Republic of Kazakhstan playing a key role in this process. An engaged dialogue with the ‘Turkish world’ is also a concept at play (see Sadykova 2013).

The primary impetus for the cultural policy of re-Kazakhisation headed by President Nazarbayev and his supporters was, on the one hand, the emigration of the Russian-speaking population (those who, for various reasons, were weakly tied to Kazakhstan as a nation-state) and, on the other, the repatriation of Kazakhs who

(for various political and economic reasons) had previously emigrated from their homeland decades or generations earlier. Altogether, this was a policy targeting a disadvantageous demographic condition in the republic after the fall of the USSR. Additionally, actions taken as part of this policy were expected to demonstrate the extent of Kazakhstan's welcoming assistance beyond its borders. In 2005, *the President* noted that 'At the present moment, Kazakhs living abroad inhabit over 40 countries of the world. The majority of them are found in the countries neighbouring with Kazakhstan'. The far-reaching population movements in the country were and continue to be a consequence of moves taken by the centralised political authorities of Kazakhstan; the repatriation policy headed by President *Nazarbayev* has had a practical dimension.

Naturally, Kazakhstan's government had to undertake detailed and planned steps in connection with the distribution and 'management' of the incoming returnees whose numbers were not so small and were growing. The territorial distribution of the immigrating Kazakhs had to take into account, on the one hand (and most importantly), the interests of the country itself and, on the other, care and consideration for the incomers themselves – their economic, social and cultural adaptation. Currently, the largest concentration of returning migrants is found in the south – primarily the three southern provinces of South Kazakhstan, Almaty and Mangystau – and especially in the cities of Zhanaozen, Almaty, Astana and Taraz. The government assumed that the incoming population would be evenly settled and not form tight neighbourhoods in large metropolises (which would most probably lead to socially detrimental ghettoisation). In effect, the greater part of the repatriates in the last wave did tend to settle in the capital or other large cities; this took place for the usual economic reason – it was relatively easier to find employment. As a consequence of this predisposition, the largest metropolises of Astana and Almaty were excluded from the planned system of settlement as of 2014.

Repatriate motivations for return

An obvious question which arises is what convinced Kazakhs in other countries to move 'home' to Kazakhstan. We can distinguish both the pull factors drawing them back as well as the push factors provoking departure from the places they had previously inhabited. Among the former factors was the suddenly very positive economic transformation – an advantageous economic climate that was linked to exploitation of the country's natural resources. Kazakhstan became an attractive destination in comparison to the generally more marginal, provincial, neglected and impoverished areas which these Kazakhs had inhabited elsewhere.

A significant incentive were the privileges created for and guaranteed to the repatriates by the government (e.g., financial assistance, concessions, etc.). Furthermore, nationwide there were 14 temporary housing centres for these immigrants. These concrete offers comprised a crucial form of persuasion, encouraging Kazakhs to resettle in their now-independent homeland. A new statute on the migration of people meant that migrants were legally assured of various subsidies and concessions. Among the numerous forms of succour and support for returning Kazakhs were:

- employment and opportunities to improve or change job qualifications;
- the creation of chances to learn the languages functioning in the country (e.g., both Kazakh and Russian);
- the suspension of military service obligations;
- affirmative action quotas in the technical and higher education systems;
- government-allocated places in preschools, schools and social services;
- pensions and benefits payments;
- compensation for victims of the mass political repressions of the past;
- the cancellation of visa fees for entrance into the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- free public health care;
- monetary subsidies for individuals with an income below the poverty line;

- the suspension of customs and duty payments;
- free transportation to the new place of residence in Kazakhstan (including the transport of property and livestock);
- one-time handouts; and
- subsidies for the purchase of housing in the new place of residence.

Specific items on this list of privileges had special meaning for specific incomers. For instance, crucial for returnees from Mongolia and China was the chance to move their livestock (the primary form of personal property which they possessed) free of transportation charges or customs payments. Stirred by great emotions in the recollection, immigrants told me how crossing the border into Kazakhstan was ultimately restricted by the Chinese authorities to a single day. Attempts were made to drive the entire herd across but, when it became impossible to accomplish this before the border was shut at night, part of the herd remained on the Chinese side of the border.

The factor which indubitably encouraged repatriation to Kazakhstan was a rapid improvement in living conditions. Economic development and a better living standard meant that Kazakhstan became an attractive leader among the states of Central Asia. Contributing to the economic growth were the profits from the exploitation of natural resources – above all, petroleum. There are settlements which, after the Soviet Union's collapse, were drained of their Russians, Germans, Poles, etc. After a while those emigrants were replaced by ethnic Kazakh immigrants.

Also playing a role in population movements were push factors. Midway into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the ethnic policies of China shifted. Prior to 2004, the Chinese government did not hinder the development of the Kazakh culture. As one repatriate from a town in the Huzha region recounted, 'There was no special autonomy but everything, including the authorities, was Kazakh' (interview PC18). Yet this respondent emphasised that, over the last several years, Chinese policies have become very antipathetic towards non-Chinese. Cultural pressures on minorities were made by the state – especially on those minorities living on lands which the Chinese state considered threatened. Forced assimilation was quickly introduced; Chinese became the sole teaching language in schools. At the beginning of the 2000s (and particularly as of 2004), Kazakhs began to sense negative attitudes: 'They forced us to speak in Chinese' (PC18).

The repatriates describe current Chinese politics as aiming at ethnic homogenisation and unification. This was achieved in part by introducing identity documents which do not indicate nationality but only citizenship: by this token Kazakhs, for instance, simply became Chinese. A second method of Sinoisation which Kazakhs from China indicate is the increase of ethnic Chinese settled into the region; after the emigration of the repatriates, the current situation is dramatically worsening because the remaining Kazakhs are becoming Chinese out of necessity.

Among Kazakhs there is a strong tradition and tendency not to intermarry with other nationalities. Therefore, as many of the repatriates underscore, the lack (for all practical purposes) of mixed marriages succoured the preservation of Kazakh culture.

A young imam – also a repatriate from China – recalled long years when Kazakhs in China enjoyed complete freedom of religion and mosques were found in every aul. Unfortunately, there was a clear turnaround in Chinese policies in 2007 with regards to other nationalities and religions. The imam himself cannot travel back to China; he assumes that he would be arrested and imprisoned. The changed conditions in China made repatriation to Kazakhstan a perfect solution. He undertook studies in a *medresa* (school or educational institution) after immigrating in 2010 and, three years later, qualified as an imam; he is capable of supporting himself and his family by trading and raising livestock.

The paradoxical consequences of transition programmes

The social welfare programmes tailored for Kazakh repatriates also have negative effects. The populace is divided into two categories: those who are entitled to assistance and those who are not. Kazakhstan-born Kazakhs see the help afforded to the incoming Kazakhs as an unwarranted injustice. Unfair are the special rights, the financial support and other privileges given to the ‘prodigal sons’, exceeding what is offered to other citizens of the country.

Nevertheless, the repatriates themselves criticise the local and national government due to the level of disorganisation. Theoretically, returning Kazakhs were due to receive help in housing their families and livestock but, in practice, much depended on the local authorities. Tensions and conflicts arose at this level. Among my respondents, there was a family of six, returnees from Uzbekistan, which was unable to elicit any sort of help (although guaranteed by law) in the Almaty area. These repatriates blamed ill-will not on the part of the Kazakhstan government in general but on a specific individual – the head of the village administration.

Interesting, too, is that Mongolian websites claim that over 1 600 Kazakh emigrants to Kazakhstan now wish to return to Mongolian citizenship. Purportedly, the Kazakhs from Mongolia complain that they were fooled by a criminal trick played on them by the Kazakhstan state as well as others who ‘lured money out of pockets’. Furthermore, they experienced problems in getting their earned retirement pensions sent from Mongolia to Kazakhstan. The tone taken by the Mongolian press is critical of the Kazakhstan leaders for their lack of democratic standards. The government in the capital is somewhat indifferent about such matters; letters sent to President Nazurbayev brought no results. Kazakhs from China also grumble about the bureaucracy and unresponsiveness of the republic’s government.

A few factors underlie the expectations which the immigrating Kazakhs associated with their decisions to relocate – usually with their entire families. On the one hand, there was surely the myth of the ideological homeland; on the other, probably as frequent, there were the negative changes in their situation as members of an ethnic minority in the destination country of their previous emigration. As noted earlier, this pertains, above all, to the numerous Kazakhs inhabiting China. Still, once back in Kazakhstan, it turned out that the government’s promises did not always turn out to be so tangible. It is not only the Kazakhs from China who complain – so do those from Karakalpakstan, a district of Uzbekistan. My respondents from there remembered their arrival in a town close to Almaty where they had been promised various kinds of amenity. Ultimately, they had to forge their own destiny, living in poverty, labouring hard and not meeting with any kindness from the local authorities. There are people whose children moved to Kazakhstan for higher education, whereas their parents experienced difficulties in moving, even if they did not wish to live elsewhere. These persons also protest about poor treatment by the Kazakhstan state.

One of the topics of grievance and bitter comments is the behaviour shown towards the re-migrants as being the worst sort of people. On the one hand, those arriving from outside Kazakhstan – even if they are unquestionably brothers ethnically – were and continue to be perceived as less educated, backward, less civilized and primitive in comparison with those seen as ‘natives’. On the other hand, the incomers see themselves as more traditionally pure, capable of preserving Kazakh culture in its most time-honoured form. This was a decisive distinction – something that bestowed a higher place on the social ladder of prestige.

The meandering process of adaptation

Even if it has not evoked acts of aggression, the adaptation process has been complex and complicated. The repatriation programme installed new divisions and social distances within the already diverse society of Ka-

zakhstan. The nature of repatriates' social integration varies and depends upon when and from where the returnees have come. Here, both push and pull factors emerge – above all, those rooted in the living standards of the origin country *vis-à-vis* those found in Kazakhstan.

Coming into play are:

- the different civilisational conditions and daily-met difficulties compared to the country of previous residence;
- the political relations, tensions or even maltreatment in the country of previous residence; and
- the degree to which Kazakhstan is economically and politically attractive.

Those among the immigrants who find living conditions in Kazakhstan decidedly more advantageous and more promising have more easily dealt with the hurdles associated with their necessary adaptation to a new sociocultural milieu. This pertains, most of all, to those who foresee better chances for the social advancement of their children and those who encountered the cultural and social freedom (free of a sense of otherness, humiliation or persecution) of which they had dreamed.

As signaled earlier in this paper, the process of adaptation was not without its local conflicts or evoked stereotypes. The native majority in Kazakhstan dubbed ethnically Kazakh immigrants from other countries as *oralmans* – literally signifying 'incomer' – but with pejorative connotations. The appearance of this colloquial term, which both differentiated and discriminated the Kazakh re-migrants, was an unintended effect of the government policies drawing Kazakhs back to their sovereign homeland. However, this effect counteracted the intentions of the policies and, hence, did not go unnoticed by the Kazakhstan authorities, who reacted very vigorously against this phenomenon: use of this offensive word was officially forbidden in both public and private spheres. Nevertheless, it was not always the case that repatriates were greeted with open arms by Kazakhs living in a given area. Especially in localities in rural regions, the incoming Kazakhs continually meet with troubles in relationships with the local residents.

Language and customs

Oddly enough, a significant impediment to in-migrants' adaptation to contemporary Kazakhstan is their lack of knowledge of the Russian language. Among other things, speaking Russian can be considered as an essential skill for employment. Different republics of the former Soviet Union had employed a variety of alphabets and Cyrillic is still used in Kazakhstan.¹ Unfamiliarity with this alphabet today can be a communication barrier in contacts with locals in Kazakhstan.

Illustrating the convolutions for the repatriates is the fact that both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan first used Arabic script, followed by Cyrillic then, after 1991, the Latin alphabet. In China, however, the Kazakhs there used Arabic, as they had even before the revolution. Likewise the Kazakhs arriving in smaller groups from Turkey, Afghanistan or Iran see Cyrillic as an unknown. Generally speaking, communication difficulties particularly affect the older generations, with the exception of those from Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Kirghizstan and Turkmenistan, where Kazakhs had also used Cyrillic (albeit sometimes adorned with unique diacritical marks).

Aside from fluency in the Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet, the return migrants stood out from the Kazakhstan-born population due to numerous cultural traits which had been preserved or had developed over decades (i.e., generations) of living in a foreign social milieu and in isolation from the core Kazakh ethnoses. As a result, the two kinds of Kazakhs differed (and continue to differ) from one another in their lifestyles, their vocations and jobs and their familiar natural environments and population densities. For instance, most of the Mongolian Kazakhs had previously lived on the steppes in miniscule familial settlements separated by great distances. Key in the mutual relations between the Kazakhstan Kazakhs and the repatriates was that it was the

latter group which turned out to be more orthodox in tradition and customs. In fact, this was crucial to the role which the repatriates saw themselves as playing – that they be resolutely more traditional.

The clash of the two kinds of Kazakhs made it clearly evident that those in Kazakhstan had significantly russified. Knowledge of the mother tongue was nearly always deeper among repatriates than it was among the majority of the native Kazakhs. This was true not only in comparison with the population raised in the USSR but also in comparison with those persons whose youth (earlier or later) had coincided with the independent Kazakhstan – a period in which the leadership had placed a strong emphasis on the reinstatement of a full, deep-seated and universal fluency in Kazakh. Among the individuals whom I interviewed, the one theme which surfaced repeatedly was unfamiliarity with the Russian language. This was the hurdle they underscored as the most fundamental in the first year or so of life in Kazakhstan. In truth, certain of the repatriates from China (living 70 kilometres from Almaty) – even after 12 years – still do not speak Russian.

Nonetheless, these returning migrants do highlight the fact that Kazakhstan Kazakhs are speaking in their mother tongue ever more frequently and better – and this, quite naturally, leads to better communication between the two groups of Kazakhs than at the outset. Therefore the adaptation here is not on the part of the immigrants but among the native population: the latter shifted to the use of the Kazakh language on a daily basis. The repatriates have taken notice and state:

Already the children are learning and the youth know their own language. Now in the shops even the Russians can make themselves understood in simple Kazakh (PC2).

In the village of *Kidirbekuli* (Uzynagash district, Almaty region) I learned from a younger immigrant (who arrived eight years previously from Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan) that the school in her village no longer offered Russian-language classes; even the few Russian children living in the area are learning Kazakh. All subjects are taught in Kazakh with the exception of the mandatory second languages of Russian and English. Returnees from various other countries now claim that – as of the last few years – a lack of fluency in Russian is no longer a problem. The linguistic re-Kazakhisation of the country is strongly advocated by the repatriates – perfectly matching the grand nationwide scheme of Kazakhstan’s leaders.

In any case, the local Kazakh population was antipathetic in its initial attitude towards the incomers. Among other things, this was manifested in the use of the word *oralman*, as described above. This situation has improved, however, thanks to the transformations of Kazakh society as a whole. Today, children are taught in schools that those who have come from afar to settle in Kazakhstan ‘should be hosted; we should set the table, offer them food, and get to know one another’ (D3).

Emigration, isolation and Kazakhness

Apart from their better and untainted familiarity with the national language, those Kazakhs who immigrated to Kazakhstan also brought back age-old Kazakh customs. In a word, it is the repatriates who are influencing many dimensions of an intended and steered process to culturally ‘Kazakhise’ their fatherland.

My respondents, repatriated from many directions, confirm that they and other Kazakhs living outside the homeland were less affected by the russification and other forms of homogenisation which emerged from the soviet lifestyle. This has been observed both by people coming from Uzbekistan (which was in the USSR until 1991) and by those coming from China and Mongolia (also under communist regimes). With great pride, the returnees accentuate their knowledge of Kazakh traditions – better knowledge than that which remained in Kazakhstan. They recount how some dances which had been totally forgotten in Kazakhstan have been restored precisely thanks to the *oralmans*: ‘This is thanks to the Kazakhs coming in from China where the [*kara zhorga*]

was preserved – and now it is danced in Kazakhstan’ (DE3). This pertains to the replanting of folk arts both on a countrywide scale as well as at the regional and very local levels.

The fact that the incomers were emigrés living in a foreign environment paradoxically led to the preservation of more traditional forms of the Kazakh customs and rituals of olden days. This includes the religious rites of the most important holy day of *Nauryz* (the archaic New Year celebration of Zoroastrian heritage), which is currently being reinstated to its former glory by the national government (Penkala-Gawęcka 2009; Suraganova 2017). Of all the cultural elements identified by the repatriated respondents, this marking of the New Year has manifested itself as crucial to Kazakh culture. It is intertwined with that culture and lends it a uniqueness.

However, *Nauryz* was banned in 1926 as part of the soviet policy of secularisation but returned in 1989 when discrimination against traditions perceived as religious or sacral began to ebb. Kazakhs who lived outside the Soviet Union for at least two generations were able to maintain this holy day’s traditional celebration. Its vivid spectacle clashes with the pale version marked within Kazakhstan. Interviews with both Kazakh intellectuals and with the simple folk of rural areas yielded opinions that the Kazakhs returning from Mongolia and China have conserved *Nauryz* in its primal, authentic Turkic form. Living for decades in China, the Kazakh emigrants had conserved all of the key components of a very complicated celebration.

The repatriates themselves take advantage of every occasion to underscore their better and fuller familiarity with both the language and culture. One of my interviewees, a woman from China, spoke of how, in the region of Xinjiang, they had observed *Nauryz*, following the traditions with great care and passing them down from generation to generation. The permanence of the intergenerational transmission was succoured by the relative freedom of religion in China where, until the twenty-first century, there was no ban on religious rituals. Still, the performance of the rites was of necessity different in the steppes of Kazakhstan and in the more dense settlement in China. Moreover, *Nauryz* was celebrated there on 11 February rather than in March, as was the case in their homeland.

Interviewees spoke of preparations that lasted several months. Autumn was a period when, as everywhere among Kazakhs, horsemeat was dried and conserved for subsequent use in a special sausage for the holiday – *nauryz kaza*. This sausage was made of the remainder of the horsemeat, whatever lasted until the preparation stage before *Nauryz*. A woman raised in China recounted how, in each home, in the *aule*, a special holiday dish was made – *nauryz kozhe*. Into *kefir* (fermented milk) go the grains of various cereals as well as macaroni-like noodles; however, the final ingredient is *kurt*, a dried cheese. She accented the fact that this was not ‘*kurt* bought in a store but *kurt* specially prepared for this occasion. You don’t just go and buy *kurt* as it sometimes happens in Kazakhstan’ (CH2). The homemade version is sundried and more tangy. Over the course of two days, each person will visit every other person in the community with the obligatory sharing of this soup. Everyone greets one another, demonstrating friendship and mutual kindness. With traditional foodstuffs prepared in a traditional way the Kazakhs express joy at having survived the winter in health along with their herds. It is not only in the northern parts of their homeland that winter brings chilly frosts and wolves put both humans and animals in harm’s way.

Similar are the accounts of traditional *Nauryz* celebrations among Kazakhs in Mongolia. Wherever families lived in great isolation from one another on the steppes, the holiday *nauryz kozhe* was left in a great caldron at home while the family went to visit and be hosted by distant neighbours. People rarely met each other personally but, since their yurts were open and a meal was in the caldron, any guests could serve themselves and symbolically be with the hosts. Everyone did likewise, going from yurt to yurt. At home today, in a Kazakh village, a huge table is simply laden with food (mostly meat) but one and all underscore how very closely they followed the *Nauryz* traditions in foreign lands.

The consequences of Kazakh repatriation to the fatherland

One of the effects of return migration to the nation-state is the impact it has on the re-Kazakhisation of the language and culture of Kazakhstan society. Nevertheless, alongside this integrative influence – which is in concurrence with the national government's intentions – another process takes place which is completely unforeseen by and contradictory to those intentions. This is best illustrated by the contemporary way in which *Nauryz* is celebrated – a feast whose essential function is to bind everyone together (including those of other ethnicities). A new, heretofore unknown, division, inconsistent with the communality of this holiday, has appeared. Kazakhs coming to the Almaty region from Nukus in Uzbekistan are celebrating the holy days together in their own tightknit circle, sitting at a table solely in their own company. Kazakhs coming from China are acting in a similar way, thus emphasising their smaller communal belonging in opposition to the rest. They feel the most comfortable amongst their own, separate from other residents in their current Kazakhstan village. Incomers from Mongolia organise a long table at home, set with many traditional dishes, while neighbours peregrinate from dwelling to dwelling. Because the village is primarily inhabited by repatriates from Mongolia, they come together in their own clique, although (as tradition dictates) all doors are open to everyone.

A sense of being different or strange is without basis along ethnocultural lines. Any differentiation of repatriates from Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan or from the Chinese and Mongolian borderlands can only stem from knowledge about the origins of each sub-group. After all, they mostly speak pure, unaccented Kazakh and, physically, nothing distinguishes them from other Kazakhs. Therefore, paradoxically, *Nauryz* – instead of uniting individuals into a single society – is beginning to underscore divergence and divisions.

This form of self-isolation could be interpreted as the effect of rejection and thus communities of cast-offs are beginning to form. The pejorative *oralman* is used against them and also appears sometimes as a slur during quarrels and conflicts. Wherever repatriates and native Kazakhstan residents inhabit a single locality, the sense of community is forced and ties are strained. Being constantly associated with their place of origin (despite belonging to the same nationality) leads to the formation of new bonds. Notwithstanding the policies of the centralised government, which is attempting to ensure a quick economic and educational start in Kazakhstan, new forms of otherness emerge according to birthplace territory criteria. The privileges accorded the incomers – stemming from concerns for their welfare and chances of assimilation – arouse envy which, instead of bringing citizens together, is building antipathy and distance.

Conclusions

Observation of the adaptation process undergone by returning Kazakh migrants and the effects of this process on the overall culture of Kazakhstan suggests a few hypotheses of a more general nature. One of these (worth keeping in mind during return migration fieldwork) is that a state of longer sequestration from the mainstream national development is decisive in the conservation and preservation of cultural characteristics. This is confirmed, for instance, by the situation of Poles who voluntarily moved to Eastern Siberia and who continue to inhabit the village of Vershina (see Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper 2003) or the Poles in Parana, Brazil, who had left their homeland at the end of the nineteenth century (see Kula 1981).

Nonetheless, the cause–effect relationship is a bit more complicated which means, for example, that factors which act as intermediary variables should be noted (see Nowicka and Firouzbakhch 2008). Under circumstances in which the development of the national core has introduced certain changes, those members of the community who emigrated are automatically excluded from the mainstream; after all, they themselves have been subject to other kinds of change as a consequence of living as a minority in a culturally different milieu. Illustrating the complications well is the case of the forced emigration of Greeks to communist Poland, followed

significantly later by a voluntary repatriation to their fatherland (Nowicka 2008). Not to be overlooked in this regard is the well-known sketch by Alfred Schütz – *The Homecomer* (1964) – in which we also find illustrations of this concept in a study of war veterans coming home, along with substantiations of a general theory of homecoming.

Hence, running parallel to isolation from any and all transformations taking place in the native country are the effects of adaptation to the conditions in the country of immigration. Influencing the intensity of the latter are numerous factors which either increase or decrease the impact of the new country's culture on the core cultural characteristics of the migrants. Apart from isolation, another pivotal factor at play in the above phenomenon is the hierarchisation of a person's own group *vis-à-vis* the dominant group in the new country. If a person's native group is positioned higher on the social ladder of the immigration country, the chances of maintaining various forms of the traditional home culture are higher. The reverse is also true: the lower (in its own perception) the guest community is *vis-à-vis* the host society, the lesser the chances of preserving cultural patterns carried over from the homeland.

Another aspect to distinguish is the process of re-adaptation by refugee individuals exiled from their homeland as opposed to that of individuals who emigrated of their own free will. This is associated with a distinction between repatriation and return migration. Here I would suggest identification of different types of repatriation. One category would be ideological versus private repatriation – along the same lines as the ideological versus private homeland proposed by Stanisław Ossowski (1984) many years ago. The fatherland can mean (as is often the case) the place in which a person was born and raised and to which educational or economic emigrants return – or from which the individual was exiled and then subsequently resettled from a private homeland back to the ideological one. The case of Kazakh returns to the Republic of Kazakhstan illustrates the latter: a return to a place where (usually) the immigrants had never lived before, where they are treated as individuals who are – to some degree – entangled by the bonds of an ideological, national community.

Note

¹ It should be noted, however, that there are ever-more-advertised plans to change over to the Latin alphabet, which better facilitates the phonetic representation of Turkic languages to which Kazakh belongs.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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