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Identity Politics in Rural Cyprus: Local and Global Power Relations

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Title: Identity Politics in Rural Cyprus: Local and Global Power Relations

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the disputed identity of rural Cyprus. It is an ethnographic study on tourism that argues that the power of western hegemony not only defines but also reverses the definition of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ identity in the cultural setting of Cyprus, in such a way that its authority is maintained and legitimized. By focusing on identity politics and tourism in the Troodos mountainous region, this study examines the conflict between native elites and locals over the definition of local identity.

In the postcolonial setting of the 1960s, native elites reproduced the western vision of ‘development’, ‘progress’, and ‘modernity’, as expressed in Europe after the Second World War. The invented concept of ‘modernity’ was introduced by native elites and was translated into policies and strategies towards the achievement of rapid ‘progress’ and the development of mass tourism in the coastal zones of Cyprus. As a result, the Cypriot authorities neglected the Troodos mountainous region as a low-priority area, and its residents were exposed as underdeveloped, backward peasants.

The economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s provided to rural residents the opportunity to finally achieve ‘progress’, by reproducing the mass tourism model. In the meantime, though, the native elites reversed the definition of modernity, which reproduced the western principles of sustainable development, and environmental and cultural heritage protection. The ‘underdeveloped’ region of Troodos was now identified as ideal for the implementation of environment and heritage conservation projects, with the ultimate goal of developing small-scale cultural tourism in the area. In this context, native elites appropriated material tradition—in other words, elements that were once classified as evidence of backwardness—in order to achieve ‘modernity’. The refusal of locals to reproduce the new paradigm of development and their persistence to strive for material modernity left them once again exposed as ‘backward’, ‘ignorant’, and ‘parvenus’ peasants.

This paper will explore the extent to which identity politics at the local level are intertwined with global unequal power relations by critically approaching the dominant discourse. To address this issue, I will explore the flow of power, from Northern European experts to local native elites and from local experts to rural residents of the Troodos region. It is argued that local cultural conditions are involved in a constant interplay with western or universal principles, to such a degree that local and global processes are now intertwined and interconnected. In other words, not only are local conditions influenced by globalization, but global principles and processes are also influenced by local cultural configurations, even in the West itself.

Having said this, I do not underestimate the role of the existing power relations in the global system. On the contrary, I argue that the existing unequal power relations are involved in a vicious cycle of producing, maintaining, legitimizing, and normalizing western hegemony. It is overall argued that the emergence of mass tourism discourse in the 1960s and its transformation into reflexive tourism discourse in the late 1980s is a reproduction of the ‘same paradigm’,

namely the western paradigm.