



NATIONAL IDENTITY BUILDING AND ROLE OF CULTURE: A CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

Since independence, the main goal of Nazarbayev was to shape a new national identity for Kazakhstan, different from the prevalent one. He stressed the requirement of a national identity based on an ethnic community, traditions, history, common values and culture of the society. Renewal policies were drafted to restore Kazakhstan's culture. These renewal policies were the policies that accommodated the age-old Kazakh values along with the few essential Soviet policies. The Kazakhs strongly supported these policies. Among many changes in the newly independent nation, the government focused on strengthening the Kazakh national identity by modifying the cultural and artistic landscape. These actions included deconstruction of the legacies, symbols and policy approaches of the Soviet era and promoting age-old Kazakhstan's legacies in many aspects of cultural life. Kazakhstan is conventionally a nomadic society. The lengthy Tsarist and successive Soviet rule degraded the pastoral lifestyle and replaced it with a sedentary lifestyle. Kazakhstan retained its nomadic heritage even after the long Soviet cultural change activities. The country's leading nation building ambition is to build a Kazakh dominated multicultural nation with Kazakh culture as shared culture, making culture an essential aspect of Kazakhstan nation-building. The paper explores, Why culture plays a vital role in Kazakhstan's nation-building? The article systematically investigates the research problem through analytical and systematic historical methods.

KEY WORDS: *culture, nation-building, cultural nationalism, Kazakhstan, Kazakh culture*

INTRODUCTION

Every part of a society is shaped by its culture. It shapes the way people think and decide what to do every day. Most of the time, people think that culture means putting memories into words through writing, music, dance, painting, art, and craft. On the other hand, sociologists believe that culture is much more than known. There are different ways to talk, dress, raise a family, and get married in each culture. People's behaviour, religious beliefs, habits, views on gender, and ways of working and having fun also differ from one culture. Society figures out what a culture is like by looking at its symbols, language, and values, which show what makes it unique and help people from the same culture recognise each other, according to Abumere. They fight with each other a lot and don't accept each other's cultures as ways of life. E.B.Taylor says that culture is a complex mix of values and beliefs, morals, rituals, skills, and knowledge about how people live in a particular society. To create a sense of national identity, art, poetry, tales, and music all play a significant role. It has a substantial impact on the national identity of a country.

One of the critical cornerstones of community development and survival is culture, and without it, no society can progress. A country's social development benefits from a strong sense of national identity based on shared values, attitudes, interests, and knowledge among members of a particular social group. As a whole, the concept of culture is

immensely complicated and multidimensional. The tale of a man's development as a social and creative force is woven into the fabric of society, as proclaimed by Staretu and Ketsman. As Berdyaev says, "... culture is associated with the cult of ancestors, with the tradition. It is full of sacred symbols in it are signs and similarities of other spiritual activities. Every culture, even the material, has a culture of the spirit; every culture has a spiritual basis - it is a product of the creative work of the spirit over the forces of nature".

In the case of Kazakhstan, arts, language, moral and religious traditions, geographic location, intellectual achievements, and historical experiences make its cultural system. Kazakhstan's national culture is a complex, evolving, and unified historical creation. Several aspects of its culture are distinct from other nations'. There are a variety of values that have been passed down orally through the generations in Kazakh traditional culture. Traditions such as environmental stewardship, a reverence for elders, and family heirloom preservation are all part of Islamic culture, as are the Islamic faith, and its own set of spiritual and moral ideals have evolved throughout its long history. It appears that post-independence Kazakhstan has stressed culture in its nation-building instead of the political aspect. It has also laid great emphasis on cultural revival. It raises the question that in the contemporary world, where politics and economics play a significant role in nation-building, Why culture plays an essential role in Kazakhstan's nation-building? It seems that



emphasising the culture makes it easier for Kazakhstan to revive its traditional Kazakh culture that was diluted during the long Tsarist and soviet rules; provides it with an opportunity to make Kazakhstan a Kazakh majority country with a multicultural structure, and offers a laidback way to assimilate minorities into the majority Kazakh culture. The paper systematically investigates the research problem through analytical and systematic historical methods. The following sections provide a brief analysis.

NATION-BUILDING AND KAZAKH CULTURAL REVIVAL

The disintegration of the Soviet Union had provided Kazakhstan's political elite with an excellent opportunity to link the nationalism and culture of its titular ethnicity with existing and newly-created government structures and thus secure greater social equality, if not privileges, for that ethnicity. Kazakhstan is a traditionally nomadic society. Long periods of domination by the Tsarist and Soviet Union have damaged the pastoral lifestyle and replaced it with a more sedentary lifestyle.ⁱ Kazakhstan kept some of its nomadic past even after the long cultural changes caused by the Soviet Union.ⁱⁱ After the country became independent, President Nazarbayev worked hard to bring back traditional culture. Since Kazakhstan got its independence, Nazarbayev's primary goal has been to give the country a new national identity different from the one that was already there. He emphasised the need for a national identity based on an ethnic community's traditions, history, shared values, and culture. The newly independent country went through many changes, but the government's main goal was to strengthen the national identity by changing the cultural and artistic landscape. Renewal policies were made to bring Kazakhstan's culture back to its Kazakh roots. These policies took both Kazakh traditions and a few critical Soviet policies into account. The Kazakhs were very supportive of these policies. As part of the actions, the Soviet-era legacies, symbols, and policy approaches were broken down, and Kazakhstan's long-standing cultural traditions were pushed forward in many ways.ⁱⁱⁱ The gradual replacement of Soviet architecture with buildings that reflect Kazakhstan's history and culture is one of the most apparent changes. Changes also included putting more Kazakh-themed films, plays, dances, or other items in theatres and film studios, supporting traditional Kazakh handicrafts, and paying for many craft festivals that tried to get people interested in the traditional arts and cultural heritage.

The government also put much effort into cultural studies as an academic field by setting up several higher education institutions, such as the National Kazakh Institute of Culture, the Zhurgenov National Academy of Arts, and the new National History Museum in Astana, which cost several million dollars, and many other open-air museums and historic sites across the country.^{iv} But along with the renewal policies, the country's minorities were given a chance to keep their own identities while living in a society with a broader range of cultures.^v Control policies were put in place to help keep their multiethnic society stable. If they didn't, it could lead to intolerance of Kazakh culture and the government.

President Nazarbayev pushed for reforms that would be good for Kazakhs, such as promoting Kazakh traditions, sports, and the Kazakh language. Kazakh is now the language of the state (even though many native Kazakhs cannot speak their language). Because of the government's policies on renewal, the Kazakh language is being used more and more in everyday life. Even though the government is trying to get people to speak Kazakh, the Kazakh people still use Russian in their daily lives, both officially and unofficially.^{vi} Many street names have gone back to what they were called in the past.

The Soviet Union, based on Marxist ideas, believed that "religion is the opium of the masses," so the Soviets adopted several actions to get rid of religious values. People in the USSR were taught to not believe in God. Kazakhstan had a religious revival after it became independent, but the Soviet past still influenced the way people feel about religion. Kazakhstan is home to 40 different religions. Islam is the most common religion, followed by Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, Tengrism, and Judaism.^{vii} Most Slavic people are Christians, most Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims, and the rest of the country's ethnic groups follow Islam. People heavily influenced by Soviet teachings often think of themselves as not believing in God.^{viii} Kazakhs identify with Islam because they think of it as part of their culture and not as a religion. Kazakhstan's constitution says that it is a secular state that gives everyone the same religious rights and freedom to follow any religion they want. It doesn't recognise any religion as the state religion. Despite strict laws, Kazakhstan permits a degree of Islamic revival as a part of cultural revival as most of the nomadic Kazakh culture is influenced by Islam.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan has limited religious activities in public places to get rid of fundamentalism in society.^{ix} Most of the time, the government used the language to help the traditional revival, as a part of which Kazakhstan desires to change the Cyrillic script to Latin script.^x Besides the areas mentioned above, Kazakhstan is bringing changes in other sectors like education to promote Kazakh cultural revival.

THE AMBITION OF MAKING A KAZAKH MAJORITY COUNTRY

Kazakhstan's independence also made it possible for many Kazakhs who lived in other countries to move back to their home country. In independent Kazakhstan, there were still a lot of Russian people. After the country got its independence in 1991, it became part of the renewal policies to have a better and more positive view of multiculturalism. All people living in Kazakhstan enjoy the same rights under its constitution. In Kazakhstan, where there are many different kinds of people, most people agree with this constitution. Kazakhstan likes to think of itself as a multiethnic society, but in reality, the Kazakhs have the most power.^{xi}

Kazakhstan is known as a country that welcomes people from different cultures. People from different ethnic groups get along well with each other. The government's goal is for Kazakhs to make up the majority of the country's population.^{xii} The ambition is evident in many open and



hidden actions and policies. Kazakhs who left their homes when the Soviet Union was in power were asked to come back and settle. The Oralmans were given benefits when they were invited into the country. It is considered that, as a result of their Kazakh ethnicity, repatriates are entitled to several benefits, including property ownership, employment, and social security benefits, among others.^{xiii} People who returned to Kazakhstan from other countries in the 1990s could take advantage of many incentives, including transportation to the nation, residence and a relocation remuneration, livestock, occupation, and free health insurance. New rules in 1997 made it simpler for Kazakh people who had returned from abroad to become permanent residents of the country.

Repatriation, rather than fulfilling the goals of the state creating a dominant Kazakh culture, started newer problems, due to which the state paused the intake of repatriates and resumed with lesser intake. However, the repatriation successfully increased the Kazakh population in the country. And the state is pursuing various ways to bring the existing Kazakhs and the Oralmans together to create a common culture. In the 1999 census, 53.4 per cent of the population was Kazakh, 30% was Russian, 3.7% was Ukrainian, 2.5% was Uzbek, 2.4% was German, and 1.4% was Uyghur. When Kazakhstan first became independent, the number of Kazakhs and Russians was almost the same.

Between 1989 and 1999, more than 1.5 million Russians and 500,000 Germans left Kazakhstan, a technical loss. Over time, the number of Kazakh groups grew.^{xiv} The 2009 census showed that the Kazakh population had grown to 63.1%, while the Russian people were 23.7% and other ethnic groups made up 13.2%.^{xv} Couples are encouraged to have many children so that Kazakhstan will have more Kazakhs. (Kazakhstan: Language, Culture, Customs, and Manners)

The Kazakh government used language to strengthen the Kazakh identity and encourage Kazakhs to settle in the country. Kazakh, which 64.4% of the population speaks, is the official state language. Russian, which 95.4% of the population speak, is called the language of interethnic communication.^{xvi} The Kazakh language used to be written in the Cyrillic script. In 2006, President Nazarbayev suggested that the language be registered with the Latin alphabet. Kazakh could not become the country's only official language because it goes against the open market system, which requires people to know a foreign language. At the beginning of building a nation, the Kazakh government focused on making Kazakh the national language. As a result, non-Kazakhs, especially Germans and Russians, left Kazakhstan, making the ethnic Kazakh populace a majority population.

The change to the Kazakh language affected teaching in the classroom, textbooks, newspapers, and media like TV and movies, which all helped to educate the public. The change to Kazakh-centered communication started right away and significantly affected the education system. It has also induced a sense of discrimination in minorities, which led them to emigrate out of Kazakhstan.^{xvii} Few Russians can speak Kazakh well or write it well. With the change came the need for teachers to speak Kazakh fluently, which means that Slavic people are less likely to teach Kazakh children in elementary and secondary schools.^{xviii} Also, the number of schools that teach in Kazakh increased, while the number of

schools that teach in Russian decreased, which also became a reason for minorities to immigrate to other nations searching for job opportunities. The emphasis and importance placed on Kazakh culture and ethnicity in Kazakhstan quickly attracted a sizeable Kazakh population residing out of the country and indirectly encouraged the emigration of minorities.

SOFT ASSIMILATION OF MINORITIES

Assimilation is most commonly defined as minority immigrant groups adopting the majority's beliefs, ideology, behaviour, and practises and therefore becoming like them. Assimilation is complete when the formerly distinct groupings are no longer discernible. Soft assimilation is where force or aggressive assimilation is absent. However, peaceful assimilation doesn't always mean that the minority assimilates into the majority culture; a new, homogeneous culture could be formed when several people come together. Those from various cultural backgrounds will come to share more and more of the same attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, perspectives and aspirations as time goes on. Social scientists study assimilation by focusing on four major features- Socioeconomic position, geographic location, language proficiency, and intermarriage rates are all factors. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, the government is constantly putting efforts to make minorities adopt the majority culture, as the primary goal of the assimilation is to make Kazakhstan a Kazakh majority nation identified by the dominant Kazakh culture. President Nazarbayev has emphasised the term 'Kazakhstani' to refer to the nation's citizens. He has convinced the people that the country belongs to all the citizens of Kazakh ethnicity playing the role of 'big brother'.^{xix}

The language was also used to assimilate minorities into the majority culture. On the one hand, Kazakhstan is a tolerant multicultural nation that provides minorities equal rights and opportunities to develop and establish minority institutions and schools and cultural spaces.^{xx} And on the other hand, the government promoted the Kazakh language through schools, electronic and print media, television, and entertainment. Aside from Russian and Kazakh, magazines, newspapers, and TV shows use ten other languages in Kazakhstan. This policy is related to articles 6, 7, and 19 of the constitution, which say that everyone has the right to learn and speak any language and communicate.^{xxi} In Kazakhstan, the government makes it possible for people to learn and use all languages. However, the authorities prefer the Kazakh-speaking population for jobs and make learning the Kazakh language necessary in schools. Everyone had to go to school between the ages of 7 and 15. Kazakhstan made Kazakh the required language of instruction to help its national language, where few schools still taught in Russian.^{xxii} The adoption of the necessitated Kazakh language made the minorities adopt the Kazakh culture.

Additionally, as a part of the culture, Islam is revived to a certain extent and utilised to make minority cultures identify themselves with the majority culture. The majority of the minorities in Kazakhstan identify themselves as Muslims, whereas ethnic Russians are mostly Christians. However, Kazakhstan is a very secular country, protecting it from fundamentalism. Kazakhstan has stayed secular thanks to the



current government and the influence of the Soviet Union (Kazakh Cultural Orientation, August 2009).

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, established a concept of "National Unity" ("Kazakhstani Nation") in 2004 through the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan.^{xxiii} The new idea of a Kazakhstani nation fundamentally alters the place of the country's indigenous Kazakh people. There is no longer a 'Kazakh country' or 'title nation,' 'autochthons,' or 'owners of Kazakh land.'^{xxiv} All ethnic groups (more than 130) are now considered autochthons and owners of the shared 'kazakhstani soil.' Some Kazakh cultural entrepreneurs were against the "Kazakhstani nation" idea. According to them, the country of Kazakhstan is only a land of the Kazakhs. As an example, Mukhtar Shakhonov (2009), a notable Kazakh politician and poet, activist, and journalist, stated his criticism as "Ul'ti tote zholy - kazakhstandyk (The direct road to the annihilation of a nation – Kazakhstani nation)".^{xxv} However, some Kazakh nationalists, who see Kazakhstan as the homeland of the Kazakhs and insist that Kazakhstan must promote Kazakh culture, were offended by President Karimov's use of the term 'Kazakhstani nation,' according to William Fierman (2005), an American polytologist and PhD professor at Indiana University who studies the Kazakh language and its prospects for its role in Kazakh.^{xxvi} The dilemma put forth by the specialists illustrates that Kazakhstan's current national identity is being formed under challenging circumstances. There were several problems surrounding Kazakhstan's self-identification process during the post-Soviet era, but this was especially true in Kazakhstan. Conspiracies arose because of a dispute between the two significant nationalities of Kazakhs and Russians after the country became an independent state. Growing nationalist sentiment in Kazakhstan and opposition from the Russian ethnos to new developments in state policy necessitated conflict resolution. However, the Kazakh culture is also promoted as a tolerant and open culture to make minorities accept the Kazakhs as compliant people and improve their relations with Kazakh and engage with them.

CONCLUSION

The Cultural Policy was started to improve Kazakh culture by putting all the policies, actions, and efforts under the Ministry of Culture and Sports. Kazakhstan learned from international experiences that the cultural sector could get a considerable boost and become a vital part of the national economy. To incorporate the cultural sector into the national economy, cultural sites should be well cared for, and public money should be used more efficiently. Making Kazakh identity stronger was one way to ensure Kazakhstan would stay independent. Kazakh history, literature, and culture were generally ignored for a long time during the long foreign reigns. Kazakhstan seeks to bring back its nomadic glory and the culture, especially the long sought after goal of making the Kazakh nation. However, several complex conditions in the country do not license the leadership to build a Kazakh nation, so the government is pursuing to form a Kazakh majority nation with a dominant Kazakh culture with which all citizens could identify. The motive is sought by promoting the Kazakh

culture as shared culture, making culture a significant part of the nation-building.

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