

# Kazakh Ethnogenesis and The Formation of Turkic Identity in Central Asia: A Historical and Cultural Analysis

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**Abstract:** As a representative ethnos of the broader Turkic world in Central Asia, this study examines the historical development and modern identity of the Kazakh people. Tracing a trajectory from early Turkic empires and steppe nomadic traditions to the consolidation of the Kazakh Khanate and Soviet-era transformations, the research highlights the interplay of tribal genealogies, linguistic continuities, and Islamic influences particularly Sufi ethics in shaping Kazakh ethnogenesis. Drawing on historical texts, oral epics, and contemporary cultural practices, the paper positions Kazakhstan as both a historical heartland and a contemporary standard-bearer of Turkic civilisation. In the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan has actively revitalized its Turkic and Islamic heritage through cultural diplomacy, digital platforms, and multilateral engagement with Turkic-speaking nations. The Kazakh identity, situated at the intersection of Kipchak ancestry, Sufi-Islamic tradition, and Eurasian geopolitics, demonstrates a dynamic continuity of Turkic civilisational identity through cultural memory, symbolic adaptation, and strategic reinvention. These findings not only deepen scholarly understanding of ethnogenesis and identity construction in Central Asia, but also underscore Kazakhstan's evolving role in cultural diplomacy, heritage preservation, and regional nation-branding. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of integrating oral historiography with cultural diplomacy analysis in post-Soviet identity studies. The findings contribute to broader debates on post-Soviet nation-building, soft power strategy, and symbolic politics across the Turkic world.

**Abstrak:** Sebagai etnis representatif dari dunia Turki yang lebih luas di Asia Tengah, studi ini menelaah perkembangan sejarah dan identitas modern bangsa Kazakh. Dengan menelusuri jalur dari kekaisaran awal Turki dan tradisi nomaden stepa hingga konsolidasi Kekhanan Kazakh dan transformasi era Soviet, penelitian ini menyoroti interaksi silsilah kesukuan, kesinambungan linguistik, dan pengaruh Islam—khususnya etika sufistik—dalam membentuk etnogenesis Kazakh. Berdasarkan teks sejarah, epos lisan, dan praktik budaya kontemporer, tulisan ini memposisikan Kazakhstan sebagai tanah air historis sekaligus pembawa standar peradaban Turki di era modern. Pada periode pasca-Soviet, Kazakhstan secara aktif merevitalisasi warisan Turki dan Islam melalui diplomasi budaya, platform digital, dan keterlibatan multilateral dengan negara-negara berbahasa Turki. Identitas Kazakh, yang berada di persimpangan antara leluhur Kipchak, tradisi Sufi-Islam, dan geopolitik Eurasia, memperlihatkan kesinambungan dinamis identitas peradaban Turki melalui memori budaya, adaptasi simbolik, dan reinvensi strategis. Temuan ini tidak hanya memperdalam pemahaman akademis tentang etnogenesis dan konstruksi identitas di Asia Tengah, tetapi juga menegaskan peran Kazakhstan yang terus berkembang dalam diplomasi budaya, pelestarian warisan, dan nation-branding regional. Secara metodologis, studi ini menunjukkan nilai integrasi historiografi lisan dengan analisis diplomasi budaya dalam kajian identitas pasca-Soviet. Hasil penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada perdebatan lebih luas tentang pembangunan bangsa pasca-Soviet, strategi soft power, dan politik simbolik di dunia Turki.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Turkic peoples are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Eurasian landmass and one of the most significant ethnolinguistic groups in the historical and cultural development of Central Asia. The political geography of Eurasia was shaped in part by their westward migration from the Inner Asian steppes, which stretched across modern-day Mongolia and the Altai Mountains. As a result of this movement, strong political structures and vast interregional networks were established, which promoted migration, trade, and the spread of culture (Golden, 1992; Lee, 2023). The Turkic peoples played a significant role in forming Central Asia's religious landscape, intercultural exchanges, and governmental systems as they spread throughout the region (Beckwith, 2009; Róna-Tas, 1999). In addition to the linguistic traditions, literary cultures, and historical consciousness ingrained in contemporary Central Asian nation-states, their legacy lives on in the establishment of significant empires like the Göktürks, Uighurs, Seljuks, and Ottomans (Johanson & Csató, 1998; Subtelny, 2007; Nasr, 2006).

In order to examine how institutional continuity and cultural fusion shaped contemporary ethnic identity, this study examines the *longue durée* of the Turkic peoples in Central Asia, using the Kazakh people as a case study. From the early rise of Turkic power in the sixth century CE to the present, the study covers the impact of the Mongol empire, the founding of the Kazakh Khanate in the fifteenth century, and the changes of the post-imperial and post-Soviet periods (Golden, 2006; Soucek, 2000; Lee, 2023). The study looks at how nomadic organisations, tribal confederations, and Islamic customs interacted to shape Kazakh identity and place it in the larger context of Turkic civilisation (DeWeese, 1994).

Unlike prior works that treat Kazakh identity primarily through Soviet legacies or religious policy, this study integrates oral epic traditions and strategic cultural diplomacy to present a more holistic, *longue durée* perspective. Three main goals guide this inquiry: first, to present a historical synthesis of the Turkic peoples in Central Asia; second, to place the development of Kazakh identity in the context of this transregional history; and third, to examine the political, cultural, religious, and social factors that shaped the Kazakh Khanate's growth and survival. Key questions are used to pursue these goals: What historical and cultural factors influenced the ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people? What aspects of Kazakh social organisation and political

power structure were influenced by Turkic and Mongol traditions? How did oral traditions and Islam support social cohesiveness and cultural memory? Reichl (1992), Tekin (1995), and Kashgari (1982), who investigate oral literature, linguistic transmission, and historical narratives in the Turkic context, are cited as foundational sources in this investigation.

Its integrated analytical approach, which connects *longue durée* history with post-Soviet identity reconstruction, sets this study apart from previous research. It thoroughly explains how Kazakhstan reconfigures its Turkic heritage as a soft power strategy for civilisation. This study offers a comprehensive synthesis that links profound historical legacies with modern cultural diplomacy, whereas previous works such as those by Golden (1992), DeWeese (1994), and Róna-Tas (1999) have concentrated on historical linguistics, Islamization, or nomadic statecraft, and recent scholarship in Central Asian Survey and Nationalities Papers has studied nation-building or memory politics in isolation (e.g., Kudaibergenova, 2019; Yessengaliyeva, 2023). It presents Kazakhstan as a proactive player in the global reconstitution of Turkic identity, in addition to serving as an example of ethnic resilience.

The paper uses a theoretical framework based on nationalism, cultural memory, and identity construction to comprehend the ethnogenesis of the Kazakhs and the symbolic resurgence of Turkic identity in contemporary Kazakhstan. Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism, which holds that contemporary countries are not entirely new creations but rather have their roots in long-standing ethnic groups whose common myths, symbols, and customs influence national identity, is at the heart of this framework (Smith, 2009). Historical legacies are mobilised to support nationhood, as demonstrated by Kazakhstan's promotion of nomadic heritage, the resuscitation of steppe imagery, and the revalorization of Turkic languages.

The way that Kazakh identity is reconstructed through state narratives, education, and public memory, especially in the post-Soviet context, is further supported by Benedict Anderson's theory of nations as imagined communities (1983). A nation-building project focused on historical continuity and future cohesion outside of Soviet frameworks is indicated by the intentional emphasis on Turkic unity, language revival, and cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, Rogers Brubaker's focus on nationhood as a political tactic and his criticism of essentialist ideas of ethnicity, what he refers to as

“groupism” (2004) are relevant to comprehending Kazakhstan’s soft power endeavours. Kazakhstan maintains its status as a centre of regional civilisation by establishing a symbolic hierarchy within the Turkic world through cultural leadership in organisations such as the Organisation of Turkic States.

Finally, Kazakhstan’s selective invocation of Turkic roots can be viewed through the prism of strategic essentialism, as defined by Spivak (1998). In order to promote national unity and seek regional diplomatic engagement, particularly with nations like Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, the nation strategically elevates Turkic identity while embracing its multiethnic fabric.

When taken as a whole, these theoretical stances show how Kazakhstan serves as both a central geographical hub of Turkic civilisation and a modern player involved in the symbolic reconstruction of that identity. Through the integration of nomadic history, state ideology, and cultural memory, Kazakhstan establishes itself as a leader in modern Turkic civilisation.

## METHOD

The following section outlines the interdisciplinary methodology employed to investigate the historical depth and modern articulation of Kazakh identity within the Turkic world. The ethnogenesis of the Kazakhs and the larger evolution of Turkic identity in Central Asia are examined in this study using a qualitative historical methodology that incorporates interdisciplinary viewpoints from history, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and religious studies. The research, which falls under the umbrella of Turkology, Islamic civilisation, and Central Asian studies, is based on primary and secondary sources to guarantee scholarly rigour, contextual accuracy, and analytical depth.

Reconstructing early Turkic socio-political and cultural institutions is based on primary sources, which include classical narrative texts, archival records, and epigraphic materials, such as the Orkhon Inscriptions and the *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*. A combination of semiotic reading (to interpret metaphors of kingship, divine authority, and ethnic unity) and source criticism (to ascertain authorship, purpose, and political context) was used to analyse the Orkhon Inscriptions. These inscriptions were viewed as tools of elite identity-building and political memory rather than just historical documents.

Simultaneously, Kazakh oral traditions were critically analysed as sources of historical consciousness and collective memory as well as folk-

lore. Interpretive hermeneutics analysed these oral sources, emphasising recurrent themes of resistance, moral order, and tribal cohesion. Oral epics were analysed using narrative thematic coding to identify recurring motifs of heroism, tribal kinship, and moral values. Historical inscriptions were approached through a comparative linguistic-historical lens, particularly focusing on symbolic constructs of legitimacy and kinship. The shezhire (genealogical stories), epic cycles like *Kobylandy Batyr* and *Alpamys Batyr*, and improvised poetry by *zhyraus* and *akyns* are a few examples. Interpretive hermeneutics analysed these oral sources, emphasising recurrent themes of resistance, moral order, and tribal cohesion. In order to facilitate comparison across historical eras and regional variations, a subset of oral narratives was also thematically coded for values like honour, kinship, exile, and spiritual guidance. Written chronicles and ethnographic accounts were used to triangulate audio archives and transcriptions from oral history repositories.

Peer-reviewed scholarly works, historical monographs, doctoral theses, and regional histories in English, Russian, and Central Asian languages were examples of secondary sources. The historical and linguistic underpinnings of the study were influenced by seminal works by academics like Lars Johanson, Devin DeWeese, András Róna-Tas, Edward Allworth, and Peter B. Golden. Recent research provided frameworks for placing the Kazakh case within larger imperial and postcolonial trajectories, particularly Joo-Yup Lee’s comparative study on Turkic and Mongol heritage from 2023.

Within each thematic chapter (e.g., governance, Islamization, language continuity), the triangulation method entailed cross-referencing various sources, including oral, archival, epigraphic, and historiographical sources. The study filled in the gaps in single-source approaches and improved the validity of findings by comparing interpretations from different disciplines. For example, to reveal how deeply ingrained Islamic values are in nomadic life, Sufi poetry from *Yasawiyya* texts was read alongside oral histories and architectural patronage patterns.

A critical historiographical lens was also used to assess divergent interpretations, especially in the legacy of Soviet-era historiography, nationalist reconstructions, and modern cultural diplomacy. Discourse analysis was employed when necessary to investigate how contemporary state narratives and commemorations selectively invoke historical components in order to validate identity politics in the present.

This research not only traces long-term continuities in Kazakh ethnogenesis but also explores the strategic reappropriation of Turkic heritage in the post-Soviet nation-building process by combining empirical data with theoretical insights from nationalism, memory studies, and identity formation. A historically informed and analytically dynamic interpretation of Kazakhstan's function as a 21st-century inheritor and influencer of Turkic civilisational identity is made possible by this methodological framework.

## **THE TURKIC PEOPLES' HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ETHNOGENESIS**

### **Inner Asia is the place of origin**

The Altai-Sayan region, which includes parts of Xinjiang, southern Siberia, and modern-day Mongolia, is where the Turkic peoples' ethnogenesis can be found. Dynamic nomadic societies with mobile pastoralism, strong leadership, and extensive trading networks were produced in this region by the first millennium BCE (Golden, 1992; Róna-Tas, 1999; Sinor, 1990; Beckwith, 2009; Lee, 2023). The early cultural differentiation of Turkic groups from Mongolic, Tungusic, and Iranian populations through unique linguistic, social, and institutional patterns is supported by archeological and linguistic evidence (Johanson & Csató, 1998; Clauson, 1972; Golden, 2006).

### **Early State Formation: Uighurs and Göktürks**

The first imperial expression of Turkic power was the Göktürk Khaganate, established in 552 CE by Bumin Qaghan of the Ashina clan. It stretched from Manchuria to the Caspian Sea and drove out the Rouran Khaganate. Tribal autonomy was maintained under centralised dynastic leadership through a dual administrative system that divided authority between eastern and western khans (Golden, 1992; Sinor, 1990; Róna-Tas, 1999). Early evidence of state ideology centered on unity, sacrifice, and divine legitimacy can be found in the development of the Old Turkic script, which is best represented by the Orkhon inscriptions (Tekin, 1995; Zieme, 2006).

The Uighur Khaganate (744-840 CE) established a literate, religiously pluralistic urban empire with its capital at Ordu-Baliq after the Göktürks. In keeping with larger trends of religious syncretism among nomadic elites, Uighur rulers first embraced Manichaeism, then Buddhism, and finally Nestorian Christianity (Golden, 1992; Sinor, 1990; Beckwith, 2009). A thriving manuscript culture and diplomatic contacts with the Tang dynasty high-

light the Uighurs' function as cultural intermediaries.

### **Migration and Growth in Eurasia**

Westward migrations of Turks followed the collapse of the Uighurs. Kipchaks, Pechenegs, and Cumans migrated into the Pontic-Caspian steppe; Karluks, Chigil, and Yaghma established Islamic Transoxiana; and the Oghuz migrated toward Anatolia, eventually establishing the Seljuk and later Ottoman empires (Golden, 2006; DeWeese, 1999; Róna-Tas, 1999).

Migration was the growth of dynastic networks and military-tribal institutions rather than a disorganised dispersal. Because of this mobility, strong states that preserved Turkic cultural identity while embracing Persian, Byzantine, and Chinese administrative practices emerged. In contrast to their Central Asian counterparts, the Turkic empires in Anatolia, particularly the Ottomans, established more centralized bureaucracies while still relying on steppe political ideas for legitimacy.

### **Oral tradition, literature, and language**

Vowel harmony, agglutinative morphology, and a common vocabulary are among the characteristics that unite the Turkic language family, which comprises more than 30 related languages, into five main branches (Johanson & Csató, 1998; Tekin, 1995). Along with preserving linguistic structure, the Old Turkic language recorded ethnographic and moral norms essential to Turkic identity in inscriptions and classical texts like Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* (Kashgari, 1982; Nasr, 2006).

Throughout Turkic societies, oral traditions such as genealogical histories, proverbs, and epics acted as cultural archives. The virtues of bravery, justice, and group loyalty were portrayed in epics such as *Manas*, *Dede Korkut*, and *Alp Er Tunga*. Similar to Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, these were maintained in Kazakhstan through *zhyraus* and *akyns* (Reichl, 1992; Golden, 2006).

### **Religious Syncretism and Tengriism**

The Eternal Blue Sky (Tengri) was the focal point of Tengriism, an ancient Turkic religion that placed a strong emphasis on reverence for ancestors, balance with nature, and the divine legitimacy of rulers through *kut* (Zieme, 2006; Golden, 1992). Tengriist ideas persisted despite later conversion to Islam, impacting social customs and political ideology (DeWeese, 1994).

A new stage of religious integration started

with the Karakhanid Khanate's Islamization of the Turkic peoples. Through poetry, spiritual ethics, and shrine worship, Sufi orders like the Yasawiyya and Naqshbandiyya localized Islamic practices (DeWeese, 1994; Ahmed, 2003; Subtelny, 2007). Central Asian Islam, particularly in rural Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, remained highly syncretic in contrast to Turkey's more formalized Sunni Islam.

### **Cultural Accomplishments and Urban Connections**

Silk Road cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Kashgar, and Merv were transformed into intellectual and commercial exchange centres by Turkic polities (Subtelny, 2007; Beckwith, 2009; Golden, 2006). They facilitated connections between China, India, and the Islamic world through trade and translation, fostering a cosmopolitan Islamic culture.

Scholars like Mahmud al-Kashgari, al-Farabi, and al-Biruni epitomize the Turkic contribution to world knowledge (Nasr, 2006; Gutas, 2001). Al-Biruni developed astronomical science, while al-Farabi combined Islamic and Greek philosophy. Throughout the Turkic world, their legacies are still cited, particularly in Kazakhstan's cultural and educational diplomacy.

### **Including the Mongol Empires**

Turkic elites were assimilated into Mongol imperial structures during the Chinggisid era (13th-15th centuries). Even under Mongol rule, states like the Golden Horde, Chagatai Khanate, and Timurid Empire preserved their steppe administrative customs and Turkic language (Soucek, 2000; Róna-Tas, 1999). The rise of contemporary Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was largely dependent on these polities.

These empires were distinct from the Ottomans, who established a more Mediterranean and imperial maritime identity, due to their hybrid nature, which combined Mongol military might, Islamic faith, and Turkic language.

### **Durable Heritage and Current Significance**

Turkic societies maintained their essential cultural identity while successfully incorporating outside influences. Their literary traditions, religious adaptations, and political innovations laid the groundwork for Central Asia's long-lasting statehood and civilisational unity (Allworth, 1994; Golden, 2006; Beckwith, 2009). As a contemporary republic that respects steppe customs, soft power, and Turkic multilateralism, Kazakhstan's national narrative today is heavily influenced by this Turkic past. As

Edward Allworth (1990) observes in his comprehensive study on the Uzbeks, the reconfiguration of identity in Central Asia often occurred at the intersection of imperial imposition and localized resilience, a dynamic equally applicable to the Kazakh experience.

## **THE TURKIC CONTRIBUTION TO THE POLITICAL AND STATE FORMATION OF CENTRAL ASIA**

### **Political Legacy and Early Statehood**

Since the early medieval era, the Turkic peoples have been fundamental in forming Central Asia's political, cultural, and intellectual landscape. Beginning with Bumin Qaghan's founding of the Göktürk Khaganate in 552 CE, the Turkic world developed a cohesive political identity based on sacral kingship, hereditary rule, and tribal confederation. This empire, which stretched from Manchuria to the Caspian Sea, was the first to formally adopt the term "Turk" as a political and ethnic identity. Later nomadic empires adopted its dual-khaganate structure, which balanced dynastic control with regional governance.

Among the first written Turkic language examples, the Orkhon inscriptions convey a vision of statehood based on cosmic legitimacy, sacrifice, and loyalty values that persisted throughout centuries of Turkic political development (Tekin, 1995). Though modified for more sedentary and Persianized court cultures, this emphasis on divine rule and military leadership would subsequently influence the ideology of other Turkic-Islamic polities, including the Seljuks and Ottomans.

### **Religion, Urbanization, and Diplomacy during the Karakhanid and Uighur Eras**

The Göktürk legacy was extended by the Uighur Khaganate (744-840 CE), which promoted urbanization and administrative complexity. Ordubaliq, its capital, was a planned city with writing systems, temples, and diplomatic posts, especially with Tang China. An early pattern of religious syncretism that became a defining feature of Turkic history was signaled by the Uighurs' adoption of Manichaeism and then Buddhism (Sinor, 1990; Liu, 2001).

By integrating Islam into Turkic governance, the Karakhanid dynasty in the tenth century signaled a sea change. They established a precedent for combining steppe authority with Islamic legalism by promoting Islamic education in places like Bukhara and Samarkand and by politically adopting Arabic in addition to Turkic (Bosworth, 1992;

DeWeese, 1994). Aligning the Turkic world with the larger Islamic ummah was a cultural and geopolitical decision.

By contrast, Ottoman state-building eventually combined Byzantine and Persian bureaucratic systems with comparable Islamic-Turkic components. However, Central Asian Turkic states like the Karakhanids maintained a dual-khanship model that reflected steppe federalism, in contrast to the Ottomans' strong centralism.

### **The Seljuks and Turkic Power's Western Expansion**

The Oghuz Turks gave rise to the Seljuk Empire, which spread Turkic influence throughout Anatolia, Iraq, and Iran. While embracing Persian bureaucratic conventions and advancing Sunni Islam as a state ideology, the Seljuks preserved their Turkic military identity. The Nizamiyya madrasas thrived under their support, giving rise to academics like Al-Ghazali and solidifying Islamic intellectual culture within government agencies (Lambton, 1981; Peacock, 2010).

Turkic identity was not restricted to Central Asia, as the Seljuks show. They combined religious legitimacy with nomadic traditions, much like the Karakhanids, but on a larger transregional scale. Their influence can still be seen in contemporary Turkish nationalism, which, especially under the AKP ideology, selectively appropriates Seljuk and Ottoman narratives to express a neo-imperial vision. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, advocates for a more inclusive and multilateral understanding of Turkic heritage that is based on post-Soviet reconciliation and steppe nomadism.

### **Chinese relations and cross-cultural exchanges**

Dynamic relations with neighboring civilisations were maintained by Turkic polities. In East Asia, the Göktürks and Uighurs fought and negotiated with Tang China, leading to cultural exchange, intermarriage, and tribute relationships. Uighur cities are clearly influenced by Chinese urban planning, administrative structure, and even religious architecture (Barfield, 1989).

These exchanges demonstrate how cosmopolitan and hybrid Turkic governance was by nature. Turkic elites in the East absorbed Chinese statecraft, just as they did in the Islamic West when they embraced Persian courtly norms. Kazakhstan's multifaceted foreign policy, which aims to achieve balance between China, Russia, and the Turkic world, is still influenced by this ability to adapt to different cultures.

### **Resistance, Cultural Resilience, and Russian Imperialism**

Turkic societies in the steppes of Central Asia and the Volga-Ural were increasingly subject to Russian imperial expansion starting in the sixteenth century. Different levels of autonomy and repression were experienced by the Kazakhs, Bashkirs, and Volga Tatars. Although the Junior Zhüz's 1731 pledge to the Russian Empire was a turning point, Kazakh clans managed to preserve internal unity through Sufi practices, *adat* (customary law), and oral traditions even as khanate power declined (Olcott, 1995; Khalid, 2007).

A reformist reaction by Turkic intellectuals, the Jadidist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries aimed to modernize Islamic education, encourage vernacular languages, and interact with print culture and science (Dave, 2007). Though its Central Asian form was specifically based on steppe customs and Soviet-imposed restrictions, Jadidism, like movements in Ottoman Turkey and Qajar Iran, signified the Turkic world's encounter with modernity.

### **Syncretism and Religious Change in Turkic Societies**

Tengriism operated as a holistic cosmology before Islam, based on ancestor worship, sky worship, and the idea of *kut*, a divine force that gave political authority legitimacy (Zieme, 2006). Many Tengriist elements persisted in Turkic ritual life even after Islamization. A localized religiosity that balanced Islamic teachings with nomadic values was fostered by the gradual adoption of Islam, particularly through Sufi orders like the Yasawiyya.

This process of religious translation is best illustrated by Ahmad Yasawi's poetry and moral teachings. His hikmets served as spiritual manuals for Turkic communities, especially Kazakhs, who combined Islam with customary oral ethics. Kazakhstan's current religious landscape still reflects the spiritual fluidity and community-based nature of Kazakh Islam, which contrasts with the more centralized and legalistic forms of Islam propagated by the Ottomans or later adopted in Azerbaijan (Ahmed, 2003 ; DeWeese, 1994; Zarccone, 2012).

### **Intellectual Networks, Urbanization, and Scholarship**

Turkic polities facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and religious thought throughout Eurasia by controlling nodes along the Silk Road. Cities with madrasas, libraries, and observatories, like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Kashgar, developed into hubs

of Islamic scholarship. In addition to preserving Turkic-Persian artistic synthesis, these cities promoted Islamic scholarship.

Architecture flourished under Turkic patronage. Mosques, mausoleums, and madrasas were examples of monumental structures with sophisticated geometric designs, elaborate tilework, and symbolic forms that connected political power with spiritual cosmology. This transregional artistic language is reflected in early Ottoman forms and the architectural legacy of the Timurid and Mughal empires (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Hillenbrand, 1994).

### **Linguistic and Intellectual Contributions**

Fundamental contributions to Islamic and international knowledge traditions were made by Turkic scholars. Al-Farabi, who was of Turkic descent, combined Islamic metaphysics with Greek philosophy. Al-Biruni was a prime example of early scientific methodology through his meticulous empirical work in geography and astronomy. In addition to preserving the Turkic language, Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* confirmed the close relationship between language and identity (Nasr, 2006; Gutas, 2001; Dankoff, 1982).

Although the Turkic world holds these scholars in high regard, they differ in how they are honored. In Uzbekistan, they are nationalized as part of the Timurid legacy, while in Turkey, they are situated within a larger narrative of Islamic civilisation. They are being cited more and more in Kazakhstan as the cornerstones of a transnational Turkic identity with steppe roots.

### **Ethical continuity and oral culture**

A final consideration is oral literature such as *Manas*, *Alp Er Tunga*, and *Dede Korkut*, has played a crucial role in maintaining moral standards as well as historical memory. These pieces, which were recited by *zhıraus* and *akyns*, went beyond mere amusement to act as teaching tools, social glue, and forms of cultural resistance.

The state's recognition of this oral tradition's potential for soft power is demonstrated by Kazakhstan's recent attempts to institutionalize it through media, education, and festivals. Kazakhstan uses oral tradition as a link between nomadic authenticity and postcolonial renewal, in contrast to Azerbaijan's emphasis on statehood continuity or Turkey's more performative use of Ottoman nostalgia.

## **KAZAKHS IN THE CONTEXT OF TURKIC HISTORY**

### **State Formation and Ethnogenesis**

An important and culturally unique subset of the larger Turkic world is represented by the Kazakh people. Through the combination of Islamic civilizational influences, Mongol imperial legacies, and Kipchak Turkic tribal structures, Kazakh ethnogenesis - a predominantly Muslim, Turkic-speaking nomadic society emerged (Kurat, 1987; Olcott, 1995; Toleubek, 2022). By the fifteenth century, the Kazakhs had unified into a cohesive sociopolitical entity, reflecting the larger processes of identity negotiation and state formation throughout the Central Asian steppe.

The Golden Horde's demise, when new polities arose from its administrative legacy, is where Kazakh political identity has its origins. The Kazakh Khanate was founded in the Semirechye (Zhetysay) region in 1465 by Kerei Khan and Janibek Khan, both of whom were descended from Jochi, Genghis Khan's eldest son. This was a deliberate act of statecraft that blended steppe autonomy, tribal confederation, and Chinggisid legitimacy rather than just a tribal secession (Kurat, 1987). The Kazakh Khanate's foundation, which is based on decentralized governance and hereditary rule, is a continuation of the Turkic-Mongol political architecture.

The tripartite *zhüz* (Senior, Middle, and Junior), regional tribal confederations that maintained internal autonomy while acknowledging the symbolic authority of a central khan formed the foundation of the Khanate (Olcott, 1995). The Kazakhs improved upon this federation model, which was similar to earlier Turkic khaganates, in order to administer their enormous, ecologically varied territory. The Kazakhs maintained federal nomadic institutions well into the colonial era, in contrast to other Turkic polities, like the Ottomans, which shifted toward bureaucratic centralism.

### **Integration of Language, Culture, and Religion**

Language continuity, Islamic spirituality, and nomadic cultural traditions are characteristics of Kazakh identity. Vowel harmony, agglutinative structure, and poetic richness were all preserved in the Kazakh language, which belongs to the Kipchak branch of Turkic. While maintaining a distinctly Turkic grammatical foundation, it developed through interaction with Mongolic, Arabic, and Persian vocabularies (Rásonyi, 1965).

Traditionally structured around clan networks, cattle herding, and seasonal migration (*kokteu, küzgi kösh*), Kazakh culture has main-

tained customary law (adat) and ancestral reverence (shezhire) as essential identifiers. The activities of Sufi orders, particularly the Yasawiyya, helped Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school gain prominence starting in the 15th century (DeWeese, 1994; Shon, 2013). Ahmad Yasawi's teachings strongly influenced the nomadic culture, which strongly emphasised spiritual guidance, humility, and inner purification. This spiritual framework, which is similar to Sufi traditions in Uzbekistan and Anatolia, assisted in integrating Islam into Kazakh society through moral harmonization rather than dogmatic imposition.

### **Collective Memory, Music, and Oral Literature**

The oral literary tradition of the Kazakhs is one of their most important contributions to Turkic civilisation. Heroic epics like *Er Töstik*, *Alpamys Batyr*, and *Kobylandy Batyr* promoted the values of justice, bravery, and loyalty. Alongside the *dombra*, a two-stringed lute that came to represent Kazakh musical identity, these tales were passed down by *zhyraus* (epic singers) and *akyns* (poet-improvisers) (Findley, 2005).

These oral traditions served as archives of morality, memory, and collective identity in addition to being sources of amusement. Similar epics, such as *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan or *Dede Korkut* in Azerbaijan, demonstrate a common Turkic epic storytelling tradition. By highlighting its crucial role in the national consciousness, Kazakhstan's post-Soviet cultural policy has worked to institutionalize this legacy through state performances, school curricula, and digital media.

### **Cultural Resilience and Geopolitical Conflicts**

The Kazakh Khanate had to deal with strong neighbors throughout its history. The biggest danger was posed by the Dzungar Khanate, whose invasions in the 17th and 18th centuries led to the "Great Disaster" of the 1720s, also known as *Aktaban Shubyryndy*. In order to maintain autonomy, Kazakh leaders like *Abylai Khan* used strategic diplomacy to forge varying alliances with the Qing Empire and the advancing Russian Empire, despite the ensuing mass displacement and death toll (Kurat, 1987).

The Junior *Zhüz* began colonial incorporation in 1731 when they signed a treaty with Russia. Despite losing its political autonomy, the Kazakh Khanate maintained a robust cultural identity based on Islamic belief, oral tradition, and tribal governance. The Kazakhs maintained a resilient peripherality in contrast to Turkic groups in Anatolia or

Azerbaijan that were subjected to Ottoman centralization. This resilience later turned into a strength during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods of cultural revival (Olcott, 1995; Khalid, 2007).

### **From Alash to Autonomy: Contemporary Shifts**

Alikhan Bukeikhanov and other reformist intellectuals spearheaded the *Alash* movement in the early 20th century, which sought to modernize Kazakh society by promoting national autonomy, secular education, and a renewed interest in the past. *Alash* intellectuals helped maintain Turkic-Islamic identity under Soviet repression and established the ideological foundation for future independence, despite being eventually suppressed by the Bolsheviks (Dave, 2007).

Kazakh culture survived the Soviet era's forced collectivization, the famine of the 1930s, and state-imposed atheism through oral storytelling, kinship networks, and private religious practice. Kazakhstan began a conscious resurgence of its Turkic heritage after 1991, emphasising the importance of the Kazakh Khanate, nomadic culture, and Islamic customs in the country's history (Abazov, 2007; Kudaibergenova, 2019).

### **Kazakhstan in the Modern Turkic World**

Kazakhstan now presents itself as the Turkic world's heir to civilisation. It supports research, cultural diplomacy, and linguistic unity as a founding member of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) and is home to the International Turkic Academy in Astana. Kazakhstan presents itself as a moderate, knowledgeable, and historically based leader of the Turkic community through collaborative publications, academic alliances, and pan-Turkic festivals (Yunusov, 2015; Kassenova, 2021).

Kazakhstan's model is multilateral, cultural, and inclusive rooted in its historical role as a steppe center of Turkic civilisation, while Azerbaijan prioritizes bilateral solidarity and Turkey seeks a more geopolitical form of Turkic leadership. In addition to being cultural acts, the *dombra's* resuscitation, the promotion of Sufi pilgrimage destinations like Turkistan, and the focus on epic heritage are also tools of soft power and nation-branding in the post-Soviet era.

### **IMPERIAL LEGACIES IN THE CONTEXT OF KAZAKHSTAN AND THE TURKIC WORLD**

#### **Steppe Sovereignty is Disrupted by Russian Annexation**

The political development of the Kazakh people and, consequently, the larger Turkic world of Cen-



tral Asia underwent a significant upheaval in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Kazakh steppe, which had previously been ruled by a dispersed but cohesive nomadic political system, was progressively absorbed under tsarist control as the Russian Empire extended its frontier aspirations southward. Motivated by the threat of Dzungar invasions, the Junior Zhüz first appealed to the Russian Empire in the 1730s with the intention of forming a military alliance. But it quickly solidified into a larger imperial annexation scheme. All three of the Zhüz confederations had lost their independence by the middle of the 1800s, and the Kazakh Khanate had been officially abolished (Olcott, 1995).

A break in civilisation was brought about by Russian imperial rule. Once essential to Kazakh economic and cultural life, nomadic mobility was restricted by new fixed borders, land surveys, and settlement plans intended to make it easier for the Slavs to colonize the steppes in the north and east. Traditional grazing lands were taken away from Kazakh communities through land confiscations, and Islamic authority and tribal unity were weakened by Orthodox missionary work and administrative Russification. Russian-appointed middlemen, many of whom had attended tsarist schools, gradually supplanted Kazakh elites. These middlemen frequently had to balance conflicting allegiances to both empire and ethnicity (Sabol, 2003).

The majority of Kazakhs experienced cultural deterioration, marginalization, and displacement despite the imperial administrators' promotion of a positive image of modernization and tutelage. Formerly founded on clan consensus and customary law (*adat*), local governance structures were relegated to distant bureaucratic authority, and traditional legal systems were replaced by tsarist codes. Nonetheless, cultural and violent resistance remained. The foundation for later revivalist movements was laid by the preservation of shards of Kazakh autonomy within spiritual and cultural domains by Islamic ulama, Sufi instructors, and oral poets.

### **The Decline of Traditional Life and Soviet Ideology-**

Soviet rule aimed to reconstruct Kazakh sovereignty's internal structure if tsarist imperialism upset it. Ethnic equality and national self-determination were promised during the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, but the pragmatic requirements of Soviet state-building quickly undermined this ideal. The goal of the 1920s *korenizatsiya* (indigenization) policy was to support native-language education, encourage

local cultural institutions, and increase ethnic representation in government. Using a script based on Latin, Kazakh intellectuals were given the authority to create literature, schools, and a sense of national identity for a short time (Martin, 2001).

But this opportunity didn't last long. By the 1930s, the USSR was under consistent ideological control due to Stalinist centralization. In an attempt to bring steppe economies into line with the Soviet agrarian plan, Kazakh herders were forced to collectivize, but this strategy backfired. The Asharshylyk famine, which killed between 1.3 and 1.5 million Kazakhs between 1931 and 1933, was one of the worst in Soviet history (Cameron, 2018). In addition to taking lives, the famine delegitimized communal institutions, disrupted nomadic customs, and destroyed familial ties.

Kazakh intellectuals, religious scholars, Sufi teachers, and traditional leaders were all wiped out at the same time by a focused campaign of political purges. They silenced the cultural elite that could have acted as a bridge between tradition and modernity. A clear shift toward Russocentric assimilation was marked in 1940 when the Soviet government switched from Latin to Cyrillic script. Historical accounts were altered to prioritize class conflict over cultural uniqueness, and proletarian internationalism took precedence over Turkic identity.

However, cultural memory persisted in spite of official repression. Islamic customs withdrew into private spheres, where they were passed down through seasonal pilgrimages to secret shrines, whispered prayers, and household rites. Epics and lamentations were still performed by oral poets, or *akyns*, who frequently used code to get around ideological censorship. Later, these clandestine customs would resurface as essential elements of Kazakhstan's cultural renaissance.

### **Turkic Identity Reclamation and Post-Soviet Revival**

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 signified an epistemic opening as well as a change in geopolitics. Kazakhstan started a massive cultural reconstitution project in the void left by Soviet ideology with the goal of reclaiming historical continuities that had been lost due to decades of Soviet homogenization. The ideology of Kazakh *eli*, or "Kazakh Nation," was developed under President Nursultan Nazarbayev as a unifying story that connected post-colonial sovereignty, Turkic heritage, and pre-Soviet history (Kudaibergenova, 2019).

A key component of this endeavor was the

exaltation of the Kazakh Khanate as a fundamental political entity and the resuscitation of individuals such as Kenesary Khan, the final anti-colonial Kazakh ruler. Once disregarded as archaic, oral literature, steppe mythology, and nomadic aesthetics were rehabilitated as markers of cultural pride. In addition to securing national identity, this historical account served to re-establish Kazakhstan on the map of Turkic civilisation.

A key component of this decolonization was language policy. Launched in stages beginning in 2017, the Latinization of the Kazakh alphabet was more than just an orthographic reform; it was a declaration of the nation's civilisational alignment with the larger Turkic world and a move away from Russian linguistic domination (Pavlenko, 2008). At the same time, state-approved religious organisations oversaw the public resurgence of Islam, especially Sufi and Hanafi traditions, guaranteeing a spiritual renaissance without causing political instability (Jonson, 2006).

This process was similar to other Turkic republics, but it also deviated from them. Increased ties with Turkey, frequently through bilateral cultural branding ("one nation, two states"), were a manifestation of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet renaissance. Religious and cultural expression were strictly regulated in Uzbekistan during the early Karimov era. The nation has only lately become more open to wider Turkic cooperation. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has taken a more multilateral approach, focusing on leadership via intellectual diplomacy and institution-building.

### **Comparative Revival Trends in the Turkic World**

Kazakhstan is unique because it coordinates culture rather than acting as a geopolitical powerhouse. Kazakhstan has advocated a "steppe-centric" model of cultural diplomacy, in contrast to Azerbaijan, whose identity revival is intertwined with regional conflicts, and Turkey, whose pan-Turkic initiatives frequently serve broader foreign policy ambitions. Its revivalist policies have prioritized scholarly cooperation, linguistic unity, and nomadic memory over political assertiveness.

Other post-Soviet Turkic states that are still balancing national unity with transnational ties will find this model appealing. Kazakhstan has avoided the exclusivist traps of ethno-nationalism by presenting a vision of shared heritage that embraces diversity through inclusive historical frameworks and the selective reactivation of Turkic civilisational symbols.

Kazakhstan is positioned as a mediator be-

tween more secularized and more religiously assertive Turkic states because of its emphasis on moderation, pluralism, and cultural stewardship. In addition to working closely with Turkey and Azerbaijan, it also engages in heritage-based cooperation with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

### **Kazakhstan's Contribution to Regional Leadership and Cultural Diplomacy**

Kazakhstan has become a symbol of the post-Soviet Turkic revival through its calculated use of cultural diplomacy. This strategy relies heavily on organisations such as the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) and the International Turkic Academy (ITA). While the OTS fosters diplomatic, cultural, and economic integration, the ITA, with its headquarters located in Astana, organises research on Turkic linguistics, shared history, and comparative folklore (Kassenova, 2021).

Kazakhstan has also been at the forefront of festival diplomacy, hosting regional gatherings that highlight Turkic music, nomadic sports, oral traditions, and cuisine. These consist of academic symposia, Turkic film festivals, and the World Nomad Games. By linking Kazakh youth with counterparts in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and the diaspora, digital platforms have expanded this outreach.

Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy is grounded in history and focused on the future, in contrast to previous nationalist models. It expresses a contemporary Turkic cosmopolitanism by referencing nomadic aesthetics, poetic heritage, and multilingual inclusivity. By doing this, Kazakhstan is not only taking back its history but also redefining what it means to be Turkic in the twenty-first century.

### **THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TURKIC SOLIDARITY IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA**

#### **Kazakhstan as a Turkic Multilateralism Architect**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has become a cultural and diplomatic hub for the Turkic world in addition to being a sovereign republic. Kazakhstan has shown a remarkable dedication to reviving common linguistic, historical, and civilisational ties among the post-Soviet Turkic republics. Kazakhstan's crucial contribution to the creation of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) in 2009 is among the most obvious examples of this dedication. With Kazakhstan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan as full members and Hungary and Turkmenistan as observers, what started out as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States has grown into a significant multilateral organisation (Organisation of Turkic States,

n.d.).

The OTS serves as a consortium for culture and education in addition to being a political platform. Its yearly meetings, which are hosted by member states that alternate, provide organised forums for talking about integration in a range of fields, such as digital transformation, infrastructure development, education, and cultural heritage management. Youth forums, cultural exhibitions, and performing arts festivals are lively parallel events that support these summits and foster a sense of shared identity across national borders. Turkic solidarity is strategically positioned as a soft-power tool and a regional anchor in Kazakhstan's multifaceted foreign policy.

### **Turkic Cultural Diplomacy's Institutional Framework**

Kazakhstan has been involved in more than just diplomatic summits. The nation has made significant investments in the establishment of institutions, especially in the fields of academia and culture. With its main office in Astana, the International Turkic Academy is a regional research and think tank that specializes in Turkology, comparative history, linguistics, and civilisational studies. It facilitates scholarly exchange among Turkic states, supports the development of historical curricula, and produces collaborative publications.

Kazakhstan also makes a significant contribution to the Baku-based Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, which is responsible for preserving intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions, and cultural landmarks. By means of these establishments, Kazakhstan advances a type of cultural diplomacy that goes beyond national branding and aims to establish a shared Turkic narrative based on cultural continuity and shared memory.

### **Cultural Renaissance: From Institutionalized Memory to Epic Revivals**

This resurgence is evident in a number of industries. *Manas*, *Alpamys Batyr*, and *Dede Korkut* are among the Turkic epics that have sparked a renewed national and international interest in literature and folklore. These texts, which were originally transmitted orally by bards, are now frequently read in classrooms, incorporated into academic programs, and presented on stage at festivals supported by the government. These epics have been formalized as foundational civilisational narratives that transmit collective values of honor, loyalty, and resistance in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to cultural policy.

These initiatives are similar to those in Turkey and Azerbaijan, where heroic characters and epics are utilized as symbols of civilisation. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, favors cultural stewardship over hegemonic nationalism and tends to highlight the nomadic, decentralized, and inclusive elements of Turkic identity. Kazakhstan is better positioned as a moderator and cultural steward rather than a dominant voice thanks to this distinction.

### **The Development of Transnational Turkic Communities and Digital Platforms**

Turkic cultural heritage has spread more quickly than ever before thanks to the post-Soviet digital revolution. In order to preserve and disseminate traditional music, folklore, historical commentary, and costume culture, platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have become essential. From Baku to Tashkent, from Istanbul to Almaty, young people in the Turkic world use these platforms to reinterpret their ancestors' customs in a modern way.

Transnational online communities have emerged as a result of this digital space, where Kazakhs, Turks, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and Azerbaijanis collaborate to produce content that promotes cross-cultural understanding and communication. For Uyghur and diaspora communities, who use digital platforms to stay connected to suppressed cultural practices, particularly in light of repressive Chinese policies in Xinjiang, these exchanges are particularly important.

Kazakhstan's relative openness enables a pluralistic and participatory Turkic digital sphere, enhancing its role as a cultural bridge and safe space for identity articulation, in contrast to the more regulated digital environments of Uzbekistan (pre-2016) or the closely watched Xinjiang region.

### **Religion and the Turkic Spheres Common Spiritual Heritage**

One of the most powerful yet varied aspects of Turkic identity is still religion. Although Sunni Muslims still make up the majority in Central Asia, regional variations in religious practices are notable. In addition to acknowledging the significant cultural influence of Sufi orders, especially the *Yasawiyya*, Kazakhstan's legal system primarily recognises Islam in its Hanafi form. Ahmad Yasawi's mausoleum in Turkistan Province, which combines the religious and the cultural, is still a popular destination for pilgrims and a national spiritual icon.

Kazakhstan maintains a moderate religious policy, reopening mosques, reviving spiritual edu-

cation, and incorporating Islamic holidays into the public calendar, in contrast to China, which has imposed harsh restrictions on Uyghur Muslims and Turkey, which has seen the politicisation of Islam under several governments. Instead of serving as a platform for ideological debate, this equilibrium upholds Islam as a moral and civilisational fulcrum.

As a third route between secular authoritarianism and politicised religiosity, Kazakhstan's model of religious revival, which is based on tolerance, Sufi ethics, and spiritual heritage, could be used to further discussions on religious moderation in the Muslim world.

### **Reforming Languages and Integrating Education**

Reviving the language has become essential to the development of post-Soviet Turkic identity. Declared in 2017 and officially approved by the OTS in 2024 through the 34-character common Turkic alphabet, Kazakhstan's continuous transition from Cyrillic to Latin script represents a significant shift toward pan-Turkic unity (Turkic Academy, 2024). The action, which realigns Kazakhstan's linguistic ecosystem with that of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, is frequently viewed through the prism of cultural policy, but it also signifies an epistemic and educational change.

Beyond spelling, this initiative has ramifications. It has an impact on diaspora connectivity, digital communication, academic exchange, and textbook production. As Kazakhstan aligns its alphabet with other Turkic countries, it contributes to developing a common literacy infrastructure, strengthening unity in pedagogical and cognitive practices as well as discourse.

### **In the Modern Era, Creative Fields and Cultural Fusion**

Today's creative expressions literature, film, fashion, and particularly music also reimagines Turkic identity. In order to create a genre that appeals to younger audiences while maintaining cultural depth, artists are fusing traditional instruments like the *dombra* and *komuz* with electronic beats, hip-hop lyrics, and folk revival aesthetics.

Leading this creative fusion has been Kazakhstan, which has urged writers, filmmakers, and musicians to return to Turkic themes. Themes of migration, memory, hybridity, and postcolonial resilience have also been explored in contemporary Kazakh literature, extending Turkic identity beyond nostalgia into a critical, international, and youth-driven cultural endeavour.

### **Festival Diplomacy and the World Nomad Games**

Kazakhstan's hosting of significant international cultural events is the clearest example of its leadership in promoting Turkic heritage. Initiated in Kyrgyzstan and hosted by Astana in 2024 the World Nomad Games united almost 90 nations to celebrate traditional wrestling, falconry, equestrian sports, storytelling, and nomadic crafts. These occasions act as showcases for soft power, positioning Kazakhstan as the hub for Turkic innovation and cultural preservation.

These celebrations further highlight Kazakhstan's distinctive contribution, which is bridging the nomadic past with a modern, globalised world and converting cultural memory into diplomatic leverage.

### **Prospects for the Future and Academic Significance**

Numerous opportunities for additional research and comparative analysis are presented by Kazakhstan's leadership in the post-Soviet Turkic revival. In order to shed light on how political ideology, historical trauma, and international alliances influence cultural narratives, scholars may investigate the variations in national revival policies among Turkic republics. Studying digital platforms can shed light on the new memory and identity architectures that are emerging in the twenty-first century, particularly in transnational Turkic communities.

Furthermore, we can better understand how Turkic identity functions as a local tradition and a global endeavour by utilising interdisciplinary approaches that combine historical analysis, anthropology, linguistics, and religious studies. Kazakhstan's situation, which lies at the nexus of empire, Islam, and Eurasian geopolitics, continues to serve as a powerful example of how cultural heritage can be used to promote solidarity, development, and diplomacy.

### **Key Findings: Turkic Identity in Central Asia and Kazakh Ethnogenesis**

The ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people is an example of a larger pattern of Turkic identity formation, influenced by long-term processes of political consolidation, cultural synthesis, and religious transformation, according to an analysis of historical, linguistic, and cultural sources. With its foundations in Kipchak tribal structures, Chinggisid imperial customs, and Islamic Sufi ethics, Kazakh identity developed as a unique and durable entity within the Turkic world's civilisational fabric. This evolu-

tion happened as a result of constant adaptation to outside forces, whether they be imperial, ideological, or geopolitical, all the while maintaining a strong foundation of oral tradition, collective memory, and nomadic values.

A key finding is the persistence of nomadic political structures like the tripartite zhüz federation system, khans (rulers), and biys (judicial authorities). Under the justification of Genghisid ancestry, these institutional structures allowed for a balance between symbolic unity and decentralised tribal autonomy. These structures remained in the cultural consciousness and adjusted to new political realities in spite of the upheavals caused by Soviet collectivisation and Russian imperialism. This continuity bolsters the claims made by historians like Golden, who highlight the steppe governance models' long-term resilience in the face of changing political environments.

The contribution of genealogical transmission and oral literature to maintaining Kazakh identity during times of political disintegration and cultural repression is equally important. Through the musical-poetic forms of zhyrau and akyn, epics like Kobylandy Batyr and Alpamys Batyr conveyed moral lessons about justice, bravery, and group loyalty. Similar to similar epics like Dede Korkut in Azerbaijan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan, these oral traditions functioned as unofficial institutions of moral instruction and identity preservation. Kazakhstan is strategically reviving oral heritage to support contemporary nation-building, as demonstrated by its recent attempts to institutionalise these narratives through state-sponsored media, cultural festivals, and curriculum inclusion.

Islam was gradually and adaptively incorporated into Kazakh society rather than abruptly breaking with pre-Islamic customs. By stressing spiritual humility, elder reverence, and communal solidarity values already ingrained in Turkic moral philosophy—Sufi orders, especially the Yasawiyya-Islamic ethics were localised into nomadic worldviews. The Bektashi order in Anatolia, the Naqshbandiyya in Uzbekistan, and other vernacular Islamic practices throughout the Turkic-speaking world are examples of other Turkic Muslim contexts that share resonance with Kazakhstan's religious syncretism. In contrast to more politicised or codified forms of Islam in Turkey or the oppressive restrictions in Xinjiang, Kazakh Sufi Islam has managed to maintain its spiritual foundation and relative pluralism.

Kazakhstan's intentional state-led strategy to revitalise and modernise Turkic identity as a foun-

dation of national legitimacy and soft power is what distinguishes it in the post-Soviet Turkic sphere. Kazakhstan presents itself as a steward of steppe-based Turkic traditions. In contrast, Turkey frequently presents a neo-Ottoman narrative of regional leadership and Azerbaijan highlights bilateral brotherhood with Turkey under the slogan "one nation, two states." Through multilateralism, scholarly coordination, and cultural diplomacy, mainly through organisations like the Organisation of Turkic States and the International Turkic Academy, it seeks this identity. Kazakhstan has continuously positioned itself as a leading actor in the revival of Turkic solidarity, in contrast to Uzbekistan, which only recently returned to active participation in pan-Turkic platforms following a period of isolation.

What Spivak has called "strategic essentialism" a selective resuscitation of cultural symbols that appeal to both local audiences and transnational Turkic publics underpins this strategic positioning. This carefully curated identity project includes celebrating dombra music, steppe imagery, oral epics, and traditional attire. Kazakhstan's decision to switch from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, bringing its linguistic infrastructure into line with other Turkic countries and symbolically separating itself from the Soviet legacy, is one of the most obvious examples of this strategy in action. In addition to reflecting larger patterns in the Turkic world, this action is a deliberate effort to place Kazakhstan in a shared Turkic communication space.

The mechanisms of this revival have been amplified by the digital age. Folk music, historical narratives, and traditional aesthetics are now widely shared through platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and local media networks. Young generations' interactions with their heritage are changing as a result of these transnational digital spaces, which are fostering an international shared Turkic cultural consciousness. Content that revitalises and reinterprets Turkic identity in dynamic and frequently creative ways is created and consumed by users from Kazakhstan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and even diasporic Uyghurs. Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy seems to be finding a balance between state direction and grassroots participation, in contrast to Turkey's more top-down heritage promotion or Xinjiang's highly censored digital landscape.

When combined, these results demonstrate that Kazakh identity is a dynamic, strategic, and historically aware construct rather than just a static holdover from the past. In addition to navigating the demands of post-Soviet nationhood, regional

diplomacy, and global cultural positioning, it draws from a rich archive of Turkic nomadic institutions, Islamic ethical codes, and epic traditions. By connecting historical memory with current relevance, Kazakhstan's model shows how a country can reestablish itself as a national community and a mediator of civilisation. In doing so, it not only affirms its own sovereign narrative but also contributes to the shaping of a broader Turkic identity in the 21st century.

According to this study, the ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people is an example of broader Turkic identity formation, resulting from a long-term interaction between long-term institutional continuity, religious adaptation, cultural syncretism, and political consolidation. With its roots in a Kipchak tribal matrix, Chinggisid imperial legacies, and Islamic Sufi traditions, Kazakh identity has withstood multiple geopolitical upheavals. It has been actively reshaped in the post-Soviet era to support regional soft-power objectives as well as national consolidation. A decentralised yet cohesive governance ethos based on kinship, *adat*, and Genghisid legitimacy was maintained by nomadic political institutions, most notably the *zhüz* confederations, *biys*, and *khans* under Mongol, Russian, and Soviet domination, confirming ethno-symbolic continuity over the long term. Oral epics like *Kobylandy Batyr* and *Alpamys Batyr*, which were performed by *zhyraus* and *akyns*, also functioned as unofficial memory institutions. They encoded moral, spiritual, and genealogical knowledge and connected Kazakhs to a common Turkic literary universe with *Manas* and *Dede Korkut*. Their modern curricular and performative revival repurposes this legacy for cultural diplomacy and nation-building. A plural, vernacular religiosity that differs from more institutionalised or politicised forms elsewhere in the Turkic world was produced by the integration of Islam, particularly through the *Yasawiyya*, which transformed pre-Islamic cosmology into a Sufi ethical framework of humility, reverence, and communal solidarity.

The state's selective elevation of symbols in the post-1991 era, *dombra* music, steppe aesthetics, traditional attire, and the Latin-script reform amounts to strategic essentialism, legitimising a historical narrative while putting Kazakhstan in line with pan-Turkic goals and establishing it as the centre of civilisation. Relatively open digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) that allow transnational Turkic communities and diasporas to co-create cultural narratives highlight an institutional, multilateral strategy that promotes both elite

cooperation and grassroots convergence. This is highlighted by leadership within the Organisation of Turkic States and the International Turkic Academy. The switch from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet further operationalises cultural realignment by improving pedagogical interoperability and cross-border intelligibility.

Kazakhstan presents itself as both a steward of tradition and a pioneer of modern cultural expression through the use of festival and pilgrimage diplomacy, such as the World Nomad Games, epic poetry circuits, and Sufi commemorations, which turn nomadic heritage into diplomatic capital. In general, Kazakhstan sets itself apart from more overtly geopolitical or bilateral paradigms by promoting a multilateral, inclusive, and historically aware model that unites tradition and innovation and mediates civilisation in Eurasia.

## DISCUSSION

While the preceding key findings outlined the foundational structures and cultural elements that constitute Kazakh identity, the following discussion moves beyond summary to critically engage these themes within a broader theoretical framework. It aims to explore the underlying tensions, contradictions, and strategic adaptations embedded in Kazakhstan's civilisational narrative, particularly as it reclaims and reconfigures Turkic heritage in the post-Soviet era.

At the heart of this narrative lies a long-term process of political consolidation, cultural synthesis, and religious transformation, which together shaped the ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people. This formation reflects a more intricate and layered trajectory of Turkic identity, rooted in Kipchak tribal configurations, Chinggisid imperial legacies, and Sufi-Islamic ethics. Sustained through oral traditions, institutional continuity, and strategic adaptability, Kazakh identity has emerged as a resilient civilisational construct, moulded by successive encounters with imperial, ideological, and geopolitical forces.

### Political Continuity and Nomadic Institutions

The survival of nomadic institutions like the *khans*, *biys*, and *zhüz* confederations is one of the most enduring aspects of Kazakh socio-political organisation. These structures made a balance between symbolic unity under the legitimising banner of Genghisid ancestry and decentralised tribal autonomy possible. These institutions persisted in the cultural consciousness and adjusted to the new political realities, even though they were dismantled ad-

ministratively during Russian imperial expansion and Soviet collectivisation. This consistency supports the claims of historians like Golden, who emphasise the steppe governance models' long-term adaptability to outside disturbances.

### **Oral Epics and Cultural Memory**

Oral literature and genealogical transmission are equally important in maintaining Kazakh identity. Through the musical-poetic forms of *zhylau* and *akyn*, epics like *Kobylandy Batyr*, *Alpamys Batyr*, and *Er Töstik* were passed down as unofficial moral education institutions, encoding values of justice, bravery, and group loyalty. These epics connected Kazakhs to a larger Turkic literary universe, much like *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan and *Dede Korkut* in Azerbaijan. Their centrality in Kazakhstan's contemporary nation-building and heritage diplomacy is demonstrated by the post-Soviet institutionalisation of these narratives through media, cultural festivals, and state curricula.

### **Religious Syncretism and Vernacular Islam**

Islam was progressively and adaptively localised within Kazakh society rather than replacing pre-Islamic belief systems. Sufi orders, especially the *Yasawiyya*, emphasised communal solidarity, humility, and respect for elders' values that were already ingrained in Turkic moral philosophy in order to translate Islamic ethics into a nomadic worldview. In contrast to the more regulated forms of Islam in Turkey or the severely suppressed Islamic customs in Xinjiang, this process of religious indigenisation promoted a pluralistic and vernacular religiosity. In this way, within the larger framework of Islamic civilisation, Kazakh Islam serves as an example of spiritual continuity and ethical rootedness.

### **Strategic Essentialism and Post-Soviet Identity Reconstruction**

Turkic symbols were selectively revived as tools of soft power and national consolidation in Kazakhstan's state-led cultural reconstruction strategy following independence. Promoting *dombra* music, steppe aesthetics, traditional attire, and an oral epic literary canon are all examples of this type of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1988). In addition to a linguistic reform, the switch from Cyrillic to Latin script signifies Kazakhstan's symbolic realignment with the pan-Turkic world, separating it from the Soviet past and placing it in a shared civilisational space.

### **Digital Platforms and Transnational Turkic Identity**

The digital age has further accelerated the mechanisms of cultural revival. YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have become important platforms for young people in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and the Uyghur diaspora to co-create and share Turkic cultural content. A dynamic and participatory Turkic cosmopolitanism is made possible by Kazakhstan's comparatively open digital environment, which stands in contrast to the strictly regulated areas in its neighbours. In addition to state-led initiatives, this grassroots cultural diplomacy promotes a multiscale identity project that is both top-down and bottom-up.

### **Kazakhstan as a Cultural Mediator and Civilisational Steward**

Kazakhstan differs from more obviously geopolitical or bilateral models of Turkic revival due to its post-Soviet identity politics. Kazakhstan presents itself as a cultural mediator with roots in multilateralism, scholarly cooperation, and inclusive heritage politics, in contrast to Turkey's neo-Ottoman narrative and Azerbaijan's emphasis on bilateral solidarity under the "one nation, two states" framework. Organisations like the Organisation of Turkic States and the International Turkic Academy provide forums for curriculum alignment, academic collaboration, and symbolic diplomacy.

Kazakhstan further demonstrates how it turns historical memory into diplomatic capital through festival and pilgrimage diplomacy, as demonstrated by the World Nomad Games, Sufi commemorations, and Turkic literary symposiums. Through these efforts, Kazakhstan is positioned as a pioneer in defining a contemporary, transnational Turkic identity as well as a defender of nomadic tradition.

In contrast to previous studies that focused primarily on Soviet-era nation-making or linguistic policy, this discussion foregrounds the synergy of oral tradition, digital reimagination, and transnational cultural diplomacy as key engines of identity reconstruction.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the historical development and contemporary identity of the Kazakh ethnos as a representative expression of Turkic civilisation in Central Asia. By tracing Kazakh ethnogenesis through the intertwined layers of Turkic, Mongol, Islamic, and Soviet legacies, it demonstrates how kinship networks, nomadic traditions, linguistic

heritage, and religious practices collectively shaped a resilient and adaptive national identity. The consolidation and endurance of the Kazakh Khanate through both tsarist and Soviet domination reflect the enduring power of tribal memory and cultural continuity.

In the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan has strategically repositioned itself not only as a sovereign state but as a civilisational actor within the broader Turkic world. Through initiatives such as the revival of oral epics, investment in cultural diplomacy, promotion of the Organisation of Turkic States, and symbolic nation-branding around halal economy and steppe heritage, Kazakhstan has emerged as a regional soft power leader. These efforts reveal a conscious reconfiguration of historical memory into tools of statecraft and international engagement.

The findings illustrate that Kazakh identity is shaped not solely by historical inheritance, but by deliberate political and cultural construction in service of modern goals regional leadership, legitimacy, and global recognition. This aligns with broader post-Soviet trends in nation-building where the strategic revival of cultural symbols is mobilised to strengthen domestic cohesion and regional influence. The study also highlights how strategic essentialism allows for the selective elevation of Turkic identity while preserving multiethnic inclusivity.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing literature on nationalism, identity politics, and civilisational diplomacy by adopting a hybrid ethno-symbolist and constructivist framework. It provides a nuanced model for understanding how long-standing cultural memory is reactivated through contemporary state narratives. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining oral historiography, archival records, and digital cultural expressions to capture both historical continuity and symbolic reinvention. The triangulated interdisciplinary approach bridges political analysis, historical ethnography, and cultural semiotics.

Looking ahead, future research could pursue comparative studies among Turkic republics to examine how distinct historical legacies and governance models shape varying patterns of identity reconstruction and heritage diplomacy. Moreover, the evolving role of digital platforms in shaping transnational Turkic consciousness warrants further exploration, particularly through the lenses of media studies, historical linguistics, and religious revivalism. Such research will deepen our understanding of how civilisational identities are negoti-

ated, reimagined, and transmitted across generations and borders.

In sum, Kazakhstan's layered and plural approach to Turkic identity rooted in nomadic, Islamic, and imperial traditions yet expressed through modern instruments of diplomacy and digital innovation, offers an instructive case of identity formation in the 21st century. This study affirms that the symbolic reconstruction of heritage can serve not only national narratives but also broader projects of transregional solidarity and civilisational revival.

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