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NEGOTIATING KAZAKH IDENTITY THROUGH THE ALTAY VILLAGE FESTIVAL IN TÜRKIYE

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Abstract. Cultural festivals are unique events where people celebrate their ethnic identity through rituals and performances. This paper discusses the brotherhood and thanksgiving festival that took place July 19-21, 2019, in a Kazakh village called Altay in the Ulukişla district, Niğde province, Türkiye. By conducting an ethnographic study based on qualitative participant observation, this paper highlights the importance of the Altay village festival in creating and reinforcing a Kazakh ethnic identity in Türkiye. The festival shows the interplay of the different experiences of Kazakh villagers from Türkiye, from the original homeland, Altay mountains in eastern Turkestan, and the new homeland in Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The paper focuses on the social and political dimensions of the Kazakh cultural festival in Altay village, including the aims of its participants and organisers. The results indicate the complexities of Kazakh identity, which were vividly showcased during the festival. In this context, it is argued that Kazakh identity is not a fixed entity; instead, it is a flexible concept that is changed, negotiated, and mythologized in this village festival.

Keywords: Kazakhs in Türkiye; ethnic identity; cultural festivals; diaspora, minority.

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«АЛТАЙ» АУЫЛ ФЕСТИВАЛІ АРҚЫЛЫ ТҮРКИЯДА ҚАЗАҚ БІРЕГЕЙЛІГІНІҢ ҚАЛЫПТАСУЫ

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ КАЗАХСКОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В ТУРЦИИ ЧЕРЕЗ СЕЛЬСКИЙ ФЕСТИВАЛЬ «АЛТАЙ»

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Аңдатпа. Мәдени фестивальдер дегеніміз белгілі бір этникалық топтың бірегейлігін дәстүрлі рәсімдері арқылы көрсететін айрықша қоғамдық іс-шара болып саналады. Бұл мақалада 2019 жылғы 19–21 шілде күндері Түркияның Нигде провинциясы, Ұлықышла ауданы, «Алтай» қазақ ауылында өткен бауырластық пен алғыс фестивалі сипатталады. Мақалада автор сапалық бақылау мен этнографиялық зерттеуге сүйене отырып, Алтай фестивалінің Түркиядағы қазақ бірегейлігін қалыптастыру мен нығайтудағы маңызды рөлін атап көрсетеді. Фестиваль Түркиядағы қазақ ауылы тұрғындарының тарихи тәжірибесін, яғни олардың атақонысы Шығыс Түркістан, Алтай тауларынан миграциялық процесі мен Кеңес Одағының ыдырауы нәтижесінде пайда болған жаңа отаны – Қазақстанмен ара қатынасын бір арнада тоғыстырады. Мақала Алтай ауылындағы қазақ мәдени фестивалінің әлеуметтік және саяси қырларына, ондағы қатысушылар мен ұйымдастырушылардың мақсаттарына талдау жүргізеді. Мақалада қолданылған конструктивизм теориясы фестиваль барысында көрініс тапқан қазақ бірегейлігінің күрделілігіне ерекше мән береді. Осы тұрғыда автор қазақ этникалық бірегейлігінің тұрақты ұғым емес екендігіне уәж келтіреді және бірегейлікті контексте сай өзгертін, қайта құрылуға бейім түсінік ретінде қарастырады.

Түйін сөздер: Түркия қазақтары; этникалық бірегейлік; мәдени фестивальдер; диаспора; азшылық.

Аннотация. Культурные фестивали – это уникальные события, где люди отмечают свою этническую идентичность через ритуалы и представления. В статье рассматривается фестиваль братства и благодарности, который проходил 19–21 июля 2019 года в казахском селе Алтай в районе Улукышла, провинция Нигде, Турция. На основе этнографического исследования и качественных наблюдений статья подчеркивает значение фестиваля деревни Алтай в формировании и укреплении казахской этнической идентичности в Турции. Фестиваль демонстрирует взаимодействие различных опытов казахских жителей Турции – из первоначальной родины Алтайских гор в Восточном Туркестане и новой родины в Казахстане после распада Советского Союза. В статье акцентируется внимание на социальных и политических аспектах казахского культурного фестиваля в селе Алтай, включая цели его участников и организаторов. Результаты исследования показывают сложность казахской идентичности, которая ярко проявляется во время фестиваля. В этом контексте утверждается, что казахская идентичность не является фиксированной сущностью, а представляет собой гибкое понятие, которое меняется, формируется и мифологизируется в рамках данного фестиваля.

Ключевые слова: казахи в Турции; этническая идентичность; культурные фестивали; диаспора; меньшинство.

Introduction

As the title of this paper indicates, the discussion centers on the concept of identity. Human identities within sociocultural systems are multidimensional, since individuals simultaneously possess multiple identities that may overlap, coexist, or even conflict with one another. Therefore, the starting point of this study is the understanding that identity is a subjective reality shaped by social processes. Among the most significant markers of identity in contemporary societies is ethnicity. Although ethnic identity has been widely discussed in the social sciences since the second half of the twentieth century, the concept continues to generate debate and scholarly interest. As John Baily (1994) notes, questions of cultural identity remain among the major challenges confronting humanity today. Modern ideologies are often constructed through the articulation of specific identity models, ranging from extreme ethnic nationalism—sometimes dangerously close to racist or xenophobic doctrines—to cosmopolitanism as an ideology of nation-building (Shaikemelev et al., 2019).

Anthony D. Smith (1986), however, approaches identity primarily as a historical and socio-cultural phenomenon rather than a purely political or ideological one. For Smith, identity is closely connected to a sense of community grounded in shared history and cultural traditions rather than abstract ideological constructs. In this regard, community identification forms an essential part of the broader socialisation process. Stuart Hall (1992) further develops this idea by arguing that identity is not a fixed or completed reality but an ongoing process that is continuously constructed and reconstructed. Cultural identities, therefore, can never be entirely stable; they are constantly negotiated in relation to changing social contexts. Within the context of globalisation, Hall highlights how minority ethnic cultures often interact with dominant cultures, producing hybrid cultural forms. Importantly, Hall does not view hybridity as a weakness but rather as a strategy that enables individuals and communities to adapt to new environments and shifting social realities.

Following this perspective, the present study focuses not on identity as a static category but on the processes of identification. This analytical approach allows for the recognition of temporal and relational aspects of identity formation. Ethnic identification involves the ways in which individuals define themselves while also responding to external labels, stereotypes, or expectations imposed by others (Slootman, 2014). Self-identification reflects how people position themselves in society and adopt identity labels such as 'Kazakh', 'Turkish', or 'Kazakh-Turk'. At the same time, identification as an analytical concept explores how individuals relate to these labels and how they interpret their own sense of ethnic belonging. Thus, ethnic identity should not be understood as an inherent characteristic determined solely by ancestry, language, or birthplace. Instead, it is actively created, negotiated, and expressed in different social contexts and historical moments (Slootman, 2018).

These processes become particularly visible in diaspora communities. Before the independence of Kazakhstan, the topic of Kazakh emigrants received little scholarly attention within Kazakhstan itself. Due to the political restrictions of the Soviet period and the policies associated with the "Iron Curtain," research on Kazakh migration and diaspora communities was largely prohibited. Individuals who had left the Soviet Union were often portrayed as enemies of socialism, which further discouraged academic engagement with the subject. As a

result, knowledge about Kazakh communities abroad remained limited until the 1990s. Today, it is estimated that approximately 4.1 million ethnic Kazakhs live outside Kazakhstan, scattered across more than fifty countries. Considering that the global Kazakh population numbers around twelve million, nearly every third Kazakh resides outside the country. The largest diaspora communities are found in China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Türkiye (Rakhimzhanova, 2021).

The concept of diaspora itself has evolved considerably over time. Originally derived from the Greek term meaning “dispersion” or “scattering,” the word was first used in English during the late nineteenth century to describe the Jewish communities living outside Israel following their exile in antiquity. Over time, however, the concept expanded beyond its original historical context to describe the dispersal experiences of many different populations. For instance, the transatlantic slave trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries created the African diaspora. Today, the term diaspora encompasses a wide range of migration experiences, including those of immigrants, refugees, guest workers, expatriates, and other transnational communities.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, scholars began to reconsider traditional approaches to diaspora studies. James Clifford (1997) argued that earlier concepts such as bounded communities, organic cultures, or clearly defined centres and peripheries had become increasingly inadequate in a globalised world. Instead of societies being firmly rooted in particular territories, modern social life has become increasingly “routed,” shaped by movement, migration, and transnational connections. Advances in communication and transportation technologies have enabled dispersed communities to maintain stronger ties with their places of origin, creating new forms of transnational identity. Clifford therefore suggested that researchers should avoid rigid definitions of diaspora based on an “ideal type,” since even the most classical cases of diaspora are historically complex and internally diverse. He emphasised that diasporic identities are shaped not only by memories of a homeland but also by shared experiences of displacement, adaptation, and interaction within host societies (Clifford, 1997).

Similarly, Brubaker (2005) proposed that diaspora should not be understood as a fixed or bounded entity. Instead, it can be analysed as an idiom, a stance, or a political claim. In this perspective, diaspora refers to a set of practices and discourses through which individuals and communities articulate connections with an imagined or remembered homeland. Understanding diaspora in this way allows researchers to examine how and when people adopt a diasporic identity, and under what circumstances such identities become meaningful. Consequently, diaspora should be approached not as an objective social category but as a flexible framework through which communities express belonging, solidarity, and collective memory.

Cultural festivals provide one of the most visible arenas in which these processes of identification are expressed. Scholars have increasingly emphasised that festivals are not merely celebratory events but also important social spaces where identity discourses and power relations intersect. Festivals allow communities to express collective identity, reinforce feelings of belonging, and sometimes challenge dominant cultural narratives (González-Reverté, 2023; Bennett & Woodward, 2013). For immigrant and diaspora communities in particular, festivals often function as mechanisms for preserving cultural heritage and strengthening intergenerational connections (Saeed & Farooq, 2024). As argued by Bennett

and Woodward (2013) festivals are liminal spaces which is distinct from everyday life, thus enable their participants to experiment with identity and identity politics. This argument stems from Bakhtin's (1984) theory describing medieval fairs and carnivals as spaces encapsulating hedonism, revelry and anti-hegemonic behaviour outside everyday social norms. While allowing participants to relax (let off steam), they contribute to the well-being of individuals and broader society. Similarly modern festivals continue to offer unregulated experiences and encounters with cultural difference through embodied practices such as dress, music, food, and behavior (Bennett & Woodward, 2013).

The impact of the cultural festivals on the identities of the people involved in the festival as participants and organizers is essential. Since festivals help to express collective belonging, people have more opportunities to connect through history, traditions, and shared values. Some national festivals can strengthen cultural self-confidence, patriotic sentiment, and emotional belonging (Deng et al., 2023). Deng et al. (2023) believe that national identity is best cultivated when both emotional resonance and fresh experiences for traditional festival visitors are created through the combination of authentic cultural inheritance with innovative, creative, and aesthetic elements. Some studies established that the authentic experience of festival participants and attendees is formed by the festival image and festival values. Satisfying feelings strengthen both the attendee's perception of festival identity and place identity (Lin & Lee, 2020).

The festival's location is a unique space where people not only showcase their culture through performances and other activities for visitors, but also shape identity representation (Getz, 1997). As a result, festival places and spaces are not neutral, because they carry meanings, ideologies, and memories. Spaces are strategically used to legitimize certain identity discourses, reinforce heritage, or contest dominant visions (Saeed & Farooq, 2024). Altay village festival is interesting for analysis, because, as it was established during the participant-observation, the festival organisers and participants expressed allegiance to multiple regional and national identities. To be more accurate, firstly, the festival is birthplace of Kazakhs, who now live in Istanbul and/or Europe. For these participants the festival is a chance to refresh their childhood memories, visit their relatives, and honor ancestors at the village cemetery (Rakhimzhanova, 2021).

This case is similar to that of the Mongolian Kazakhs. According to Barcus and Werner (2017), Mongolian Kazakhs who decided to stay in Mongolia instead of immigrating to Kazakhstan after its independence, actively used their cultural history to re-establish place identities in Mongolia. Kazakhs in Mongolia use a particular narrative of 'Kazakh identity' that goes beyond the official state narratives. As Barcus and Werner (2017) argue, their narrative was connected to a particular place. This approach was especially visible via visitation rituals to ancestor burial sites in Mongolia (Barcus and Werner, 2017). Secondly, the migration history of Kazakhs to Türkiye in the 1950s from the Chinese communist state was instrumentalized intensively to assert their identities in the Altay village festival. Throughout the festival Kazakhs highlighted the link between modern diasporic Kazakh identity and the nomadic culture. The festival reminded Kazakhs in Türkiye of their ancestral ties to the nomadic pastoral life in the Altai Mountains of East Turkestan. That is why the Kazakhs in Türkiye often refer to themselves as 'Altay Kazakhs'. The village festival aimed at demonstrating a symbolic continuation of nomadism among

Kazakhs in Türkiye, although they stopped being nomads shortly after exodus in the 1930s and 1940s from China.

These actions demonstrate that families tend to maintain their place identity and transcend it through generations (Barcus and Werner, 2017). Even the act of naming the Kazakhs' village as 'Altay' can be interpreted as a deliberate effort to counteract a loss of 'sense of place' often experienced by diaspora communities, as noted by Kahuno (2017), thereby maintaining a symbolic connection to their ancestral homeland. In these circumstances, festivals are crucial for maintaining cultural identity by strengthening a person's connection to a specific place. Interestingly, Altay village festival transcended the idea of belonging to several physical locations (Altay village, Türkiye, Altay Mountains, East Turkestan, Kazakhstan), which reminded me of the theory of 'liminality' strongly advocated by Victor Turner in the 1960s. Although there was a fixed location of the festival (i.e., Altay village, Nigde district, Türkiye), the real "destination" for participants was the Kazakh cultural world. The latter is in fact the liminal space, a temporary in-between zone where everyday rules and responsibilities are suspended. Thus, in this world, people can experiment with new identities and visions of society (Luckman, 2013).

In such liminal environments, participants collectively experience and reinterpret cultural traditions. As Luckman (2013) suggests, festivals do not necessarily create new physical spaces; rather, they enable individuals to construct new personal and collective maps of identity. Examining the Altay village festival, therefore, provides valuable insights into broader processes of ethnic identity formation within diaspora communities. Unlike large national celebrations organised by state institutions, this small-scale community festival demonstrates how local initiatives can actively contribute to the preservation and negotiation of cultural identity in migration contexts. By focusing on the experiences of the Kazakh diaspora in Türkiye, the study contributes to the growing body of research on diaspora festivals and highlights the importance of community-based cultural practices in sustaining collective memory and ethnic belonging.

Materials and Methods

This research was a part of the author's larger PhD study on Kazakh ethnic identification processes in Türkiye, which was successfully defended in December 2020 at Hacettepe University in Ankara. For this paper, the author conducted a qualitative ethnographic study of the Altay Village Traditional Brotherhood Feast (Altay Köyü Geleneksel Kardeşlik Toiy). The researcher obtained her ethics approval to have formal acknowledgement by the ethics committee at Hacettepe University to ensure that their research study meets ethical standards and guidelines. To produce this paper, the author mainly relied on the participant observation method. It was part of her fieldwork, that took place from July 19-21, 2019, in Altay Village, Ulukisla district, Türkiye. This approach allowed the author to explore the social and political dimensions of the event and its role in consolidating Kazakh ethnic identity.

Participant observation provided the opportunity to document the spatial organization of the festival, the sequence of ceremonial events, and the interactions among participants. Field notes were taken throughout the three-day celebration, capturing observations related to performances, speeches, religious rituals, and informal social gatherings. Particular attention was paid to the symbolic elements of the festival, such as clothing, musical instruments, visual decorations, and food practices. These observations allowed the researcher to analyze

how cultural symbols were intentionally mobilized by organizers and participants to express belonging and reinforce collective identity.

Apart from participant-observations, this research relies on primary field data such as interviews with organisers and village inhabitants. The materials were selected according to the principle of representativity (different ages, genders, and social roles). For data analysis, thematic coding was used, which enabled the researcher to identify 6 identity narratives presented in the Results and Discussion part. In this article, examples from interview transcripts were not used, because their deep analysis was presented in the author's PhD dissertation. Consequently, to avoid reiterating the same information, in the paper, the author emphasizes the descriptive aspects of the festival.

Results and Discussion

Brief History of Kazakh Exodus and Altay Village

Approximately 20,000 Kazakhs migrated to Türkiye as settlers and migrants beginning in the 1950s from the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region, PRC (China), a region still often referred to as East Turkestan in some academic literature. When Kazakhs were officially recognized by the Turkish government as refugees, they were awarded a special status as *iskanli göçmenler* (recognized migrants). This status was only awarded to people of Turkish descent and culture (Kuşçu, 2016), which meant that upon their arrival in Türkiye, the Kazakhs were granted special benefits by the local government. Initially, they were hosted in refugee camps in Istanbul and later relocated to various rural parts of Türkiye. Today in Türkiye, there are not many villages left with a predominantly Kazakh population. The village of Altay, located in the Ulukışla district of Niğde province, is the only surviving Kazakh village in Türkiye. Established in 1954, it was initially named Ural. However, the first settlers, who arrived on August 30, 1955, successfully insisted on renaming it Altay as a tribute to the Altai Mountains in their ancestral homeland (Rakhimzhanova, 2021).

The distance between the village and Ulukışla district is 29 km, whereas to Niğde, the province centre, it is 48 km. In 1955, in accordance with the Settlement Law No. 2510, 165 families moved to this village. Each villager was given 30 decares of land with a house (Liman, 2006, pp. 35–37). However, today, many of the government housing has become old and empty. The primary school here was opened in 1957 and functioned until 1995. Afterwards, due to the declining number of students, it was closed. Today, primary and secondary school children study in Ulukışla, commuting there by school bus, while high school students stay in boarding schools in Bor, Niğde, and Ankara (Anadolu High Schools). In 1961, the villagers constructed the mosque. In the garden of the mosque, there used to be a madrasa. Today, it is used as a guesthouse in summer for Kazakh visitors from Europe and Istanbul.

Today, due to mass migrations, the number of families from the initial 165 in 1955 dropped to 15. In the past, people in Altay used to work in the leather industry. Some of the Kazakhs who owned leather factories in Zeytinburnu, Istanbul, were originally from this village. In the 1970s and 1980s, the leather business in the village was blossoming and bringing a lot of profit to Kazakhs there. Leather factories used to operate as family businesses and continue to be so, though the number of Kazakhs who deal with leather reduced enormously. This happened because of the economic crisis in Asia and Russia in 1997–1998, which had irreversible negative effects on the sector and led to a decline in both production and export of Turkish leather. An ethnographer, Ingvar Svanberg (1989), who studied the Kazakh diaspora in Türkiye, wrote that

during his stay in the Altay village he helped in the people's workshops, assorting leather and delivering loads of ready pieces to Istanbul. Since the leather industry came to an end, most of the village inhabitants moved to Bor, a neighboring town. There are no shops in the village. The families do their grocery shopping either in Bor or in Ulukışla, sometimes even in Niğde. There is no public transport either; a person should own a vehicle to go to the centre.

The migration experience profoundly shaped the collective identity of Kazakhs in Türkiye. Many families preserved memories of their difficult journey through oral histories that were transmitted from older to younger generations. These stories often emphasize themes of endurance, sacrifice, and the search for a safe homeland. Such narratives play an important role in maintaining a shared sense of historical experience among diaspora members. During the Altay village festival, these migration memories were frequently referenced in speeches, prayers, and informal conversations, demonstrating how historical trauma and resilience continue to influence contemporary expressions of Kazakh identity.

From Football Tournaments to Village Festival

Liman (2006) claims that Altay village had a strong football team during the 1970s and 1980s. This reputation made them famous in the town of Niğde, the centre of the province. From the beginning of the 1990s, the villagers organized annual football tournaments exclusively for Kazakh football teams from different regions of Türkiye, such as Istanbul, Develi/Kayseri, Ismil/Konya, and Sultanhanı/Aksaray. These tournaments were a symbolic act that coincided with the independence of Kazakhstan. They attracted about a thousand spectators and served as a bonding event for Kazakhs. The tournaments continued until 1994, but due to mass migration from the village, they eventually came to an end. In response, the elderly of the village came up with the idea of establishing a festival, shifting the focus from sports to a broader cultural celebration.

The first Altay village festival took place in 2006. The villagers began to host this festival with a dual purpose. Firstly, the festival aims to unite Türkiye's scattered Kazakh population, reminding them of their shared heritage. Secondly, it works to strengthen the bond between Kazakhs and Turks, celebrating their brotherhood despite existing physical and cultural differences. Many Kazakhs refer to this event as a Thanksgiving Day to express their gratitude to the Turks who welcomed them as refugees in the 1950s. The Altay village festival, therefore, serves as a platform for exploring and celebrating diverse ethnic and cultural identities.

The national narratives at the festival were complex and often contradictory. From the perspective of Kazakhstan's national policy, which views the Kazakh diaspora as an extension of the state, the participants were celebrating their connection to Kazakhstan. This view was supported by the Kazakhstani Embassy's sponsorship of the event. However, a closer look reveals a more nuanced reality. Kazakhs from Kazakhstan sometimes harbor animosity toward their diaspora counterparts, whom they may view as traitors for their ancestors' flight from communist rule (Genina, 2015). In return, diaspora members often see themselves as "pure and authentic" Kazakhs because their language and traditions were not influenced by Russian culture. This internal conflict was evident at the festival, which became a space where people both celebrated their shared identity and confronted feelings of 'otherness.' To counteract these divisions, organizers and local participants stressed their common identity as members of the Turkish community.

The Altay village festival lasted three days. On the first day, the hosts welcomed international and local guests and managed their transportation and accommodation. The day was dedicated

to the ceremonial events, whereas on the third, the guests were taken to the city of Cappadocia for a tourist visit. The ceremonial day had morning and afternoon programmes. The first part took place in the village itself. In the village, the festival participants listened to public speeches and enjoyed the sports and music activities. An open-air photo exhibition featuring images of the first Kazakh settlers in Türkiye in the centre of Altay village was also part of cultural activities. The second part of the ceremonial day was held in the town of Niğde, and it was planned with a goal to attract a wider audience of local Turkish citizens. Kazakh artists who performed in the village in the morning gave another concert to Niğde citizens in the evening in the central square. However, a highlight of the festival in Niğde was the cortege walk (marching) (in Turkish: kortej yürüyüşü), a solemn procession that took place before the concert. Marchers themselves and spectators were deeply moved by this solemn procession, because the collective walk was a physical manifestation of people's feelings about being Kazakh and belonging to Kazakh culture.

Cultural Elements Developing Ethnic Identity

The festival was well structured and executed around 6 (six) cultural elements that were identified by the researcher. These elements include religion, political discourse, arts, visual symbols, traditional food, and elements of tangible/material culture. There is no doubt that these components are essential in constructing ethnic identities. However, in the festivals, they are emphasized even more and create visible boundaries between festival hosts and outside spectators. The Altay Kazakh village festival was not an exception. The following paragraphs have a detailed discussion of each element and its wider political and cultural implications.

1. Kazakhs and Islam

The ceremonial day started with the prayers from the Qoran to commemorate and honour the spirits of Kazakhs who perished in the Himalayas and the Taklamakan Desert while fleeing Xinjiang. These prayers highlighted the deep connection between Kazakhs' religious and ethnic identities. The festival once again confirmed the idea that Kazakh ethnic identity is inseparable from its religious Islamic identity. In fact, both these identities complement each other. As argued by Radford (2014), historically, being designated as a 'Muslim' in Central Asia was an ethnic identifier used by indigenous communities to distinguish themselves from non-indigenous groups, such as Russians. Furthermore, in the post-Soviet era, Islam and ethnicity were strategically used to legitimize the political dominance of titular nations. Thus, Kazakhs in the first years of independence began to actively revive their practice of religion to strengthen their national identity. The Kazakh diaspora in Türkiye played a significant role in this revival. A notable example is Halifa Altay, a Kazakh scholar who returned to Kazakhstan after spending 39 years in Türkiye, at the personal invitation of the first president, with a mission to help revitalize Islam in the newly independent state.

2. Kazakhs as a Political Force in Türkiye

The scholars already pointed out the potential of festivals in serving as a political platform and how they are effectively used by politicians and cultural figures to strengthen a sense of identity among communities and engage in political campaigning (Kahuno, 2017; Lüdtkke, 2005). Thus, while analysing the Altay village festival, we cannot miss out the fact that Kazakhs in Türkiye are an important part of the electorate. During the festival, someone who is aware of the political context in Türkiye would probably see the Kazakh population leaning towards two major political parties in Türkiye, such as the Nationalist Movement Party and the Justice

and Development Party. By inviting their officials to the festival, Kazakhs were transcending the message: “Yes, ethnically we are Kazakh, but politically we are still dedicated Turkish citizens.” Although the purpose of the festival was to celebrate the ethnic heritage of Kazakhs, their actions affirmed their political loyalty to the Turkish state.

3. *Performing Kazakh Identity via Music and Dance*

The Altay village festival demonstrated the significant role of music and dance in constructing and celebrating Kazakh ethnicity. A celebratory aspect of the event was created through the musical performances. A central element of these performances was the *dombyra*, a traditional two-stringed, long-necked Kazakh musical instrument. For Kazakhs, the *dombyra* is more than an instrument; it is a tangible cultural symbol that is filled with ethnic and traditional values. Diaspora communities believe that simply owning a *dombyra* or listening to its music helps them to connect to their ancestral homeland (Post, 2007). That is why *dombyra* players dominated among other performers in the Altay festival. Furthermore, participants also enjoyed the dance, *Kara Jorga*. These performances served as a vital link to their past and the homeland they left behind. Music and dance performances during the festival also played an important role in transmitting cultural knowledge to younger generations. Many of the performers were children and teenagers who had learned traditional songs and dances through family traditions or community cultural groups. Their participation illustrates how diaspora communities actively reproduce cultural heritage through intergenerational transmission. In this context, the festival serves not only as a space of celebration but also as an informal educational environment where younger participants learn about their cultural roots and develop a sense of pride in their ethnic background.

However, the younger generation of performers from Kazakh diaspora also used Turkish traditional instruments. In their actions, it is possible to track the sense of belonging not only to one culture, but several. See Fig. 1, where a young Kazakh girl, in a traditional Kazakh costume, plays the *bağlama* (Turkish traditional music instrument) and sings the Turkish folk song ‘*Mağusa Limanı*’. This performance, using cultural symbols from both nations, expressed the young girl’s sense of belonging to more than one place.



Fig. 1. A Kazakh girl singing a Turkish song. Photo from the field data.

Fig. 1 illustrates not only the participation of youth in musical practices, but also the symbolic union of Kazakh and Turkish cultures using instruments from both traditions.

4. *Visual Symbols: Patrimonialisation of Nomadism*

It is possible to claim that the musical performances are tied to visual symbols. Most of these visual symbols draw heavily from the nomadic heritage of the Kazakh people. The key visual symbols of Kazakh culture, which were persistent throughout the festival, were the yurt (the transportable nomadic dwelling), traditional clothing, and *dombyra* (Kazakh traditional music instrument). The festival featured two yurts: one was a permanent structure in the village, and the other was a mobile yurt set up in Niğde's city center for the event. The Altay village festival can be seen as a revival project, as it works to preserve the cultural memory and nomadic traditions of Kazakhs, a crucial effort for the younger generations in Türkiye.



Fig. 2. The yurt, Niğde, Türkiye. Photo from the field data.

Fig. 2 demonstrates how visual symbols function as tools for public identity representation, engaging both the Kazakh diaspora and the local Turkish population.

Although the festival participants witnessed other symbols such as the *dombyra* and traditional Kazakh costumes, the yurt stood out because of its size and public interest. The yurt in Niğde drew a large crowd, with people queuing to go inside and take photos. This was because the yurt holds symbolic meaning for both Kazakhs and Turkish people. In Türkiye, there is a widespread belief that Anatolian Turks are descendants of nomadic Oghuz tribes who migrated from the Turan valley in Central Asia. This nomadic heritage is reinforced through both official historical accounts and popular culture (Rakhimzhanova, 2021). For Turkish citizens, the yurt represents a connection to this shared nomadic past.

As we argue, the emphasis on nomadic culture is a driving force for Kazakh nationalism existing in both the Kazakhstani state and diaspora communities. According to Ferret (2016), this strategic promotion and politicization of heritage is called 'patrimonialization'. This process is especially vital for young nations seeking to invent or consolidate their national history. After the collapse of the USSR, Central Asian republics, including Kazakhstan, launched

extensive patrimonialization campaigns. As Galiev (2002) highlighted, it was the beginning of the mythologization of such cultural elements as “language, religion, the legacy of ancestors, elements of material and spiritual culture, ..., notions of a ‘golden age’ and original homeland, etc.” (Galiev, 2002, 384) to perform ethnic mobilization. In this context, the Altay village festival offered a favorable environment for depicting the mythologized symbols that became indicators of Kazakh identity.

Ferret (2016) argues that the state’s patrimonialization of nomadism has led to the rise of immobile yurts. These yurts can be found along roadsides and in towns across Kazakhstan. These modern immobile yurts have become a key part of Kazakh nation-branding, underscoring their significant contribution to strengthening Kazakh identity both within Kazakhstan and abroad. Thus, the immobile yurt in the centre of Altay village has emerged as a powerful symbol of the Kazakh community—reflecting both their ties to a nomadic past and their determination to affirm their ethnic identity.

5. Food distribution

The village festival name includes the Kazakh word *toi* (feast, celebration), and traditional food was an essential part of the celebration. The ceremonial day began with a traditional breakfast with *boursaqs* and *shelpeks* (traditional fried pastries) with milk tea. The day concluded with a communal meal of *palau* (rice and meat dish) traditionally prepared for large community rituals like weddings and funerals. Some scholars highlight food as a symbol, the meaning of which transforms depending on the context of events. To illustrate this, in festivals of Alevi people in Türkiye, passersby and the poor are given *lokma* (consecrated food) with an aim of commemorating saints and significant religious events (Soileau, 2005, cited in Rakhimzhanova, 2021). The festival food in Altay village served a dual purpose; the first one was to showcase the cuisine, where Kazakhs had an opportunity to highlight traditional Kazakh dishes. Therefore, the cooks decided to include *boursaqs*, *shelpeks*, *palau*, and milk tea on the menu, considering them authentic Kazakh dishes that would represent their people’s identity well. The second purpose of food servings was to express gratitude. During the festival, many strangers had the opportunity to taste Kazakh food. It was a way of thanking the Turkish people for welcoming and supporting Kazakhs upon their arrival in Türkiye in the 1950s. In this context, the act of sharing food became a powerful symbol of thanksgiving and gratitude.

6. Souvenir Stands: Networking and Business Partnerships

The sources quite often indicate local festivals as a means for boosting the regional economy. In fact, some regional festivals can generate millions in revenue and create many jobs (Saeed & Farooq, 2024). The Altay village festival is not about direct financial revenues. The festival itself was sponsored by the Kazakhstani Embassy. However, the festival had an indirect positive impact on local business development, because the festival space operated as a networking platform for business owners from Kazakhstan and Türkiye. It was a favorable environment to negotiate future agreements. Business relations were actualized via ethnic relations. For instance, the festival attendees often prioritized making an agreement and setting business partnerships with Turkish companies owned by Kazakh businessmen.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper contribute to the broader literature on diaspora festivals by demonstrating how small community events can become powerful arenas for negotiating

complex and multilayered identities. The Altay festival is unique because the hosting community embraces a sense of belonging that extends beyond a single geographical, regional, or national identity. While the festival is physically located in a small Turkish village, it encompasses a wide range of historical and cultural contexts. The cultural space created by the Kazakhs stretches from Altay village in Niğde province to the Altai Mountains in Xinjiang, and from Türkiye to Europe, Kazakhstan, and China, connecting a global diaspora. As seen from the discussions above, nomadic history and Kazakhstan's state policy help Kazakhs from Türkiye to maintain their ethnic identities. However, the nature of these boundaries is rather flexible and open to various modifications. A variety of factors may influence Kazakh identity in Türkiye. If Turkic roots and Islamic religion bring the Kazakhs closer to Turkish people, their nomadic history and unique culture make them part of the larger Kazakh community in the world.

This has become possible only after the dissolution of the USSR and the independence of Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs from Türkiye developed their own identity narrative as an alternative to the official state version through highlighting the connection to their original homeland, the Altay Mountains in Xinjiang, and their current place of living, the Altay village. It was deeply felt via the three-day Altay village festival, which was a unique event that not only showcased but also strengthened the diverse identities of the Kazakh community. Throughout the festival, the local Kazakhs skillfully instrumentalized their nomadic past to enhance their ethnic visibility among other Turkish citizens. Additionally, the international significance of the event was demonstrated through the high number of Kazakh participants from other countries. Thus, it is possible to argue that the Altay village festival will continue to be a suitable environment for Kazakhs to produce and reproduce their ethnic identity, bringing together their histories, cultural values, and ideals not only from Türkiye but from other countries. However, this study has certain limitations. It focuses on a single festival event, whereas future research could examine festivals of other Kazakh diaspora communities in countries such as Mongolia, China, or Germany. In addition, future studies might explore how digital media and social networks extend the symbolic space of the festival beyond its physical location.

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