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“SARKYT” TRADITION IN KAZAKH CULTURE AS AN EXAMPLE OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

An examination of the historical process reveals that nations sharing common characteristics such as religion, language, and ethnicity have, over time, adopted unwritten rules and behaviors transmitted orally from generation to generation. These rules and behaviors eventually evolved into traditions that have been passed down and preserved to the present day. Among these societies, the Kazakh people possess a particularly rich repository of traditions. The intangible cultural heritage of the Kazakhs, who have a deep-rooted history, has been maintained for centuries thanks to the strength of their oral tradition, which has played a significant role in the formation and preservation of their customs.

Rituals associated with major life events—such as birth, marriage, weddings, death, and funerals—along with the practices performed before and after these ceremonies, contain a variety of traditions. Among these is the *sarkyt* tradition, which appears in various ceremonies as one of the Kazakh customs. This study aims to provide information about the *sarkyt* tradition and also includes examples from Kazakh epics that reflect traces of their deep-rooted cultural past.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, *Sarkyt* Tradition, Kazakh Culture, Epic

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage elements consist of oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, various rituals and festive events, traditional cuisines, local health practices, community-developed calendars, folk meteorology, and handicrafts (Eren, 2025: 872–873). Since 2003, efforts have been carried out under the auspices of UNESCO to identify and safeguard these elements. Identifying intangible cultural heritage elements before they disappear is significant not only for the history of humanity but also for preserving the traditions and culture of the relevant community.

Traditions hold an important place in Kazakh culture. Before addressing one of these traditions, the sarkyt tradition, it is necessary to provide information about Kazakh culture and some factors that have influenced its formation. Since the subject of this study is tradition, topics relevant to the study such as religion, belief, and customs—which are, the fundamental building blocks that constitute culture—will be discussed.

The Turkish nation, which possesses a very rich accumulation in terms of concepts such as customs, traditions, and habits that constitute culture, has transmitted these invaluable riches orally and in writing from generation to generation. For a nation to sustain its existence, it must protect its national values (Çetindağ Süme, 2007: 218). As one of the Turkish peoples, the Kazakhs possess this rich cultural heritage. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, which gained its independence in 1991, has emphasized national elements to avoid assimilation and forgetting its values. Since 1991, Kazakhstan has highlighted a shared Turkish culture and identity and, with state support, has undertaken activities aimed at strengthening Kazakh national consciousness (Kınacı and Balcı, 2020: 47).

To revive national values, the nation must maintain its national elements such as traditions, customs, culture, language, history, etc. Culture is the foundation of national values. With the formation of culture, traditions have gradually emerged. According to Kottak (1987), "Culture encompasses learned behaviors and beliefs that are transmitted from generation to generation, are rule-governed, shared, and based on symbols. Not only well-educated people but everyone is cultured. The Homo species (in general) has the capacity for culture, but people live within distinctive cultures according to their upbringing. Culture relates to humans' use of language and symbols and their capacity for cultural learning. Culture concerns traditional attitudes and behaviors and internalized behavioral rules through education" (cited in Berger, 2012: 142). Based on this explanation, it is observed that culture is invariably associated with elements such as behavior, language, learning, and tradition, and that these elements complement one another. Since the research focuses on tradition, the relationship between culture and tradition is emphasized, and as traditions often develop alongside religious elements, the relationship between tradition and religion is also of importance.

Tradition refers to any habit, custom, or behavioral pattern that has been passed down from generation to generation over centuries, ensuring that a community shares a common spirit and forms an unbreakable bond (Ayverdi, 2010: 410). The term tradition also shares usages with words such as custom, habit, and

anane, with anane being used synonymously with tradition in Turkish (Ayverdi, 2010: 55). Tradition is "the style of producing and using knowledge, movements, and material products that have been unofficially acquired and transmitted from generation to generation, allowing for a degree of individual creativity, change, and development according to the needs of the time" (Ekici, 2004: 18). Since humanity has existed, people have created their cultures, produced traditions, and lived under their influence (Uğurlu, 2010: 9). Considering Ekici's definition of tradition, it is understood that traditions undergo some minor changes over time. The examples provided in this study support this notion. The fact that the sarkyt tradition is used in not just one but several meanings shaped by religion, belief, desires, and other factors suggests that it may have undergone some changes throughout historical processes.

When considering the relationship between tradition and culture, "culture in its broadest sense is knowledge, design, belief, lifestyle, worldview, behavioral patterns, and immaterial aspects that can be transmitted from one generation to another" (Seyyar, 2007: 336). Traditions develop gradually through learning and usually take several generations to form; therefore, they tend to have a rigid and change-resistant structure (Uğurlu, 2010: 36). Like everything in life, tradition also has a source, and its most fundamental source is religion (Uğurlu, 2010: 82). Religion appears as the most crucial element in every aspect of human life because it connects people to each other and to life, provides a purpose for living, and serves as the source of beliefs. The act of believing has been and continues to be significant in every period and moment of human life because humans always need something to believe in for which they are willing to fight, live, and hope.

Religion and tradition are regarded as sacred terms and, influenced by culture, are associated with one another (Uğurlu, 2010: 145). This raises the question: Which comes first, religion or tradition? According to Schuon, tradition derives its essence from religion. According to Guénon, religion takes different forms that are shaped and diversified by tradition across various geographical regions. Guénon, discussing the diversity of religions, states that what forms the "transcendent unity of religions" is not tradition but truth. This truth binds humans to themselves through religion. The word religion itself means "to bind." Tradition, on the other hand, is the manifestation and application of this bond at various levels (Vural, 2003: 169). As understood, while the answer to this question remains debated, Guénon's ideas are more insightful. Guénon's depiction of religion as the binding force and tradition as the means of applying this bond demonstrates that traditions act as instruments of religion. When these ideas are examined, the inseparable unity and complementarity of culture, religion, belief, and tradition become apparent.

It is understood from all these sources that among the beliefs, lifestyles, and tangible and intangible values that constitute a society's culture, traditions are one of the most important elements. Tradition is a cornerstone of culture. Looking from the past to the present, it is clear that the Turks, who have lived for many centuries and continue to live, possess a multifaceted culture. As one of these Turkish communities, Kazakh Turks have many traditions nourished by their beliefs, encompassing ceremonies requiring celebration or mourning such as birth, death,

funerals, military service, and war. Considering the multitude of traditions possessed by Kazakh Turks, this research is limited to the "sarkyt" tradition, which is one of the Kazakh traditions, and focuses intensively on this subject.

2. Sarkyt Tradition

It is known that traditions and customs generally emerge as a result of certain beliefs and convictions. The sarkyt tradition is also recognized as a custom rooted in specific beliefs and expectations within Kazakh culture. Although various sources attribute different meanings to the sarkyt tradition, it is generally explained in similar terms.

In Kazakh Turkish, the literal meaning of "sarkyt" refers to the remaining part of something, considered the best or most delicious portion (Eski, 2021: 330). Some explanations about the sarkyt tradition align with this literal meaning.

Known as the leftover portion of food or drink, sarkyt is commonly practiced with kumis (fermented mare's milk) among Kazakh Turks and appears as a tradition born from belief. Typically, in Kazakh society, the sarkyt tradition involves feeding or offering the leftovers from the meals of respected and beloved individuals to those who wish to resemble them. According to this custom, it is believed that those who consume the sarkyt will take after these esteemed individuals (Bulut, 2023: 174). This sarkyt is usually fed to people by hand; if it is a drink, it is poured into the hands and consumed, a practice referred to as "asatmak" (Arıkan & Türkmen, 2007: 147).

Like many traditions, the sarkyt custom has been adopted over time based on beliefs and certain desires. It consists of actions intended to fulfill some hoped-for or desired outcomes. From this perspective, it is clear that there is a purpose and conditional aspect to adhering to the sarkyt tradition.

Hospitality holds great significance among Kazakh Turks. In Kazakh culture, being a guest in a home does not require knowing the host or sharing the same religion or ethnicity. Even strangers can be guests to Kazakh Turks. Such customs are taught to children from a young age, primarily to ensure the continuity of these traditions. Guests at a household have the right to request food from the host's home to take back to their own, referring to it as their "undivided fortune" (Naunova, 2020: 62). Among Kazakh Turks, the practice of bringing leftover food from the host's table to the guest's home after a meal is well established, and this practice is called the sarkyt plate or simply sarkyt (Mutlu, 2018: 98). Kazakh Turks place great importance on their guests and have integrated various customs and traditions such as sending sarkyt as part of their hospitality into their daily lives.

In addition to valuing guests, Kazakh Turks have the custom of offering a "dish of generosity" (aş tabağı). Guests are highly respected, and dishes are served according to the guest's importance and status. Each guest is served from specially named plates, a practice that has become customary (Naunova, 2020: 63).

Sarkyt is generally the food left after ceremonies such as weddings, feasts, celebrations, and funerals, which is sent by the host to relatives, friends, or acquaintances who could not attend (Naunova, 2020: 65). Sending sarkyt—wedding food and gifts—to guests who could not attend the wedding is very

important. Underlying this tradition is the belief of "may there be such a wedding in your home too" or "may this be your turn" (Zhumabekov, 2023: 9).

Moreover, in Kazakh Turkish culture, after wedding-related celebrations such as bride retrieval and the wedding itself, the food and drinks remaining on the bride and groom's table after guests leave are taken as *sarkyt* either by the guests themselves or sent by the wedding hosts to families with marriageable children—either daughters to be brides or sons of marriageable age. This practice carries the belief that those families will be blessed with marriage (Çetin, 2018: 235). When examining this meaning, it is evident that the concept of *sarkyt* is associated with food and hospitality, and it also reflects issues of desire and belief.

In Kazakh funeral ceremonies, it is customary for everyone to support and assist the deceased's family. This collective aid is generally referred to as "aza sulu." Those who come to help are usually relatives and close acquaintances, and the number of helpers is also significant. Large and small livestock are slaughtered during these ceremonies, and the meat is shared with guests. According to customs and traditions, the meat from these animals is divided into 12 portions and placed before the guests as *sarkyt* (Çetin, 2021: 282-283).

Considering the views and explanations related to the *sarkyt* tradition, it is apparent that concepts such as eating, drinking, and hospitality have become traditionalized under the influence of Kazakh culture. Moreover, the fact that *sarkyt* is mostly practiced on important days for Turks—such as hospitality occasions, funerals, and weddings—demonstrates the undeniable connection between culture and tradition. Another commonality found in sources about the *sarkyt* tradition is that it is performed with belief, aimed at fulfilling certain desires, which reveals the link between belief and tradition. However, during the research process, it was observed that there are numerous views and methods concerning the *sarkyt* tradition. The fact that this tradition does not fit into a single mold indicates that it has undergone some changes over generations or has had some additions layered on top of its traditional form. These changes appear to have arisen as a result of people's beliefs and the desires shaped by these beliefs. The *sarkyt* tradition, formed in accordance with these beliefs and desires, has survived to the present day through culture and faith.

3. Traces of the Sarkyt Tradition in Kazakh Epics

Among the Kazakhs, epics are one of the most significant repositories for the preservation of intangible cultural values. Upon examining these epics, it becomes evident that the *sarkyt* tradition is not fixed to a single meaning but rather takes shape according to people's beliefs and desires. In some sources, the consumption of food or drink referred to as *sarkyt* is depicted as a means of resembling a respected person; in others, it is presented as an offering made during occasions such as weddings, deaths, or funerals. In certain cases, *sarkyt* functions as a vehicle for the fulfillment of wishes, while in others, it is described as an act performed by individuals who wish to experience the joys previously lived by others. These variations indicate that the tradition has undergone certain changes over time in response to evolving needs.

Some findings related to the sarkyt tradition observed in Kazakh epics are as follows:

(1)

Jana Edige tabaқ tartқanda sol üydegi kisilerdiñ béri de Edigege asatsıñ¹, sosın kımız bergende, kımızdın sarkıtın Edigege işkizsin. (Arıkan and Türkmen, 2007: 146-147)

“When Edige distributes food, everyone in that tent should eat a handful of food from the table he brings the plates to. Then, when the kımız arrives, everyone should also give Edige the kımız sarkıt to drink.”

(2)

Bir jerde sol künderi toy bolıptı
Barsam dep bala toyға oy bölıptı.
Mal da iyen, aıl da iyen sen de kesen
Biy barma sarkıt äkep berem dedi (Mutlu, 2018: 327-328).
“There was a wedding somewhere in those days,
The child thought to go to that wedding
The property is your owner, the village is your owner, if you go too
He said, don't go, I'll bring you a sarkyt”

(3)

Atқosşı biy jiberген bastı berdi
Sarkıtı toydan bergen osı – dedi (Mutlu, 2018: 329).
“The assistant gave the head of the sender
He said this is the pendant that gave from the wedding”.

(4)

Sarkıt je dep şakırdı joldastarın
Toymasañ da aız tiy toydın dāmin.
Biyekem toydan sarkıt dep äkeldi
Barmasañ da sodan bil toydın jayın (Mutlu, 2018: 329).
“He invited his friends to eat sarkyt
Even if you can't get enough, enjoy the wedding
My master brought it as a sarkyt from the wedding.
Even if you don't go, find out the wedding status here.”

¹ It is a tradition for someone to fill their hands with food and feed someone else at the table to show that they love and respect them very much. (Arıkan and Türkmen, 2007: 147).

(5)

Sarı tabaqtan sarkıt kaydadı degen. Biylikti mağan berseñiz, şu özeniniñ oñ jağın Üysin sol jağın Arğın jaylasın, buğan qalay karaysızdar? (Töreqlulı, 1992: 35)

“He said, ‘A sarkyt comes from a yellow plate.’ If you gave me the principality, the Üysin tribe will be on the right side of the Şu River, and the Arğın tribe will be on the left side. What do you think of that?”

(6)

Balağa sarkıt aldı sınamağa (Mutlu, 2018: 280).

“To test the child, he brought him a sarkyt.”

(7)

Sarkıt dep Sabalağa bermek boptı

Töle biy tağı sinap körmek boptı.

Kasına erip barğan atqosşığa

Sarkıt dep Sabalağa apar depti (Mutlu, 2018: 328).

“He wanted to give it to Sabalak as a sarkyt

Mr. Töle wanted to try it once again.

To his assistant whom he went with,

He said send it to Sabalaka as a sarkyt.”

(8)

“Sarkıt” dep aparıp ber Sabalağa

Nazar sal kıymılına sol bir şakta (Mutlu, 2018: 328).

“Take it to Sabalak as a sarkyt

Pay attention to what he does at that moment.”

(9)

- Mınañ, dep toy sarkıtı alıp barğan

Sabalağ maldan kelip uyıqtap qalğan (Mutlu, 2018:328).

“ This is it, he said, taking the sarkyt from the wedding

Sabalak came from grazing animals and fell asleep”

4. Conclusion

People are born, grow up, live a certain lifespan, and eventually die. Between birth and death, they experience many events and are exposed to numerous situations. Throughout this process, various patterns of behavior and actions emerge. These behaviors, memories, and experiences play a role in the formation of culture. By nature, humans live with a sense of curiosity and a desire to explore. During this process, they see, learn, and question new things. As a result of all these interactions, fundamental elements such as belief systems, culture, customs, and traditions—which constitute the identity of a nation—are formed.

The belief system profoundly influences the life, culture, lifestyle, and traditions of societies. In this study, the impact of beliefs and desires on tradition is clearly observed. Indeed, in every example encountered concerning the sarkyt tradition, it is evident that adherence to and continuation of this custom are generally based on a wish, desire, or belief. This tradition typically involves food served or sent to people's homes following certain ceremonies such as hospitality, weddings, celebrations, and funerals. Additionally, the practice of giving sarkyt is associated with desires such as resembling respected individuals or the marriage of unmarried people, and it has become a matter of belief. The aspect of the sarkyt tradition in which respected individuals feed or offer the leftover food to those who wish to resemble them with their own hands evokes the expression "el vermek" (literally "to give by hand").

Another important finding of the research is that traditions do not possess legal authority; rather, they are actions performed over long periods because they are deemed correct by people. The study reveals that following traditions enhances one's respectability, whereas neglecting them results in loss of respect, although there are no serious sanctions. This tradition has continued among Kazakhs and has become a highly valued custom. This study demonstrates how beliefs, convictions, and desires shape traditions.

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