

# Martial Arts in Kazakhstan: Revival and Role in Modern Society

**Rustam R. Muzafarov, Vice Chairman, Kazakhstan National ICH Committee**

Martial arts did not lose its importance in the modern world. On opposite, these sports demonstrate its social diversity and adaptation capability. The scholars enriched the theory and teaching method that allows these ancient martial sports to remain effective socialization system in the modern world.

There is no doubt today about the historical essential role of the nomadic peoples in cultural exchange between different parts of the world. Nomads facilitated the spread of knowledges and cultural skills. In the absence of modern means of communication, it were nomads who ensured the interaction of various ethnic and cultural communities. This fact emphasizes the importance of nomadic migrations in the safeguarding and promotion of the world heritage.

Traditional sports and national games provide a significant contribution to the national identity and shaping of customs and traditions.

The original fun or traditional types of physical activity remain to serve the basis of traditional games. One continues to observe it during the calendar holidays, festive events, special events or religious rites. Most of it happen during the national or local festivals with manifestations of epic oral masterpieces, folk music and dances. These festive events normally include the fairs of crafts and artisans collections. However, the traditional sports and games constitute the most spectacular part of these events since ancient times - horse racing, wrestling, lifting weights, agility competitions etc. The studies of this *emporium ludorum* phenomena is of great interest both for academicians and public audience [1].

UNESCO has declared the traditional games as a solid part of the cultural heritage of humanity. This recognition reaffirmed the importance of the traditional games and sports in the reproducing of ethnocultural identity and cultural diversity and cultural transfers between generations. In 2005 UNESCO General Conference had recommended to the Member States to define and establish the mechanisms of the information exchange about the traditional games and the countries' efforts on its safeguarding. The World Nomadic Games were inscribed by the Kyrgyz Republic to the UNESCO Representative List in 2021. Kyrgyzstan had hosted the international competitions since its establishment - in 2014, 2016, and 2018. The 4th World Nomad Games were held in 2022 in Iznik, Turkiye. 3 thousands athletes from 82 countries were competed in 13 sports. The 5th World Nomad Games were conducted quite recently in Astana, Kazakhstan. This time more than 2,000 participants from 98 countries met at sports arenas for 21 type of sports and attended the social and academic venues. It include horse races, national types of wrestling, traditional intellectual games, competitions in martial arts, traditional archery, national types of hunting with birds, horse racing, folk games, as well as exhibition performances in ethnic sports.

These Central Asia games continue the ancient martial sports tradition which was inherited from the ancient nomadic peoples - Huns, Syanbi, ancient Turks, Khitan and other. Martial arts included competitions in strength and dexterity, archery accuracy, horse riding. These games were an important element in the upbringing of the younger generation of warriors in the military-oriented ancient nomadic societies of Central Asia. Religious ideas were characterized by a visible war cult and military affairs. The epic creations which were developed by the first nomadic states of Central Asia provide the strong reflection of the era of heroic warriors.

The nomadic lifestyle defined the distant location of the tribes and settlements which impacted on the capabilities to defend it in case of the enemies' invasion. Eventually, it was impossible to join forces in a short time period to protect against wild animals or hostile actions of strangers. The nomads had to rely only on their own strength and therefore the archery skills became indispensable not only for hunting, but also for defense. Not only men - warriors and hunters, but also by women and children owned the archery skills. Experienced elder people transferred the skills of craftmaking and repairing weapons, shooting. This knowledge has been used at hunting, and also for protecting herds and families. Women possessed developed the same of archery and took part in hunting. Nomadic *ethnopedagogy* included the transfer of moral principles, customs and traditions to children, training them with the necessary labor skills, horse riding. But it also necessarily required the Turkic peoples to be capable to shoot from a bow and ride horse. This knowledge was passed from generation to generation almost up to the twentieth century.

When the nomadic society gained the feudal features, the festival did not lose its sacrifice tribe qualities, but it had been acquired the additional function of a military check-up. This was conducted by khans and noyons for selection of candidates for their military squads. Martial arts and games were accompanied by feasts, arranged at the end of campaigns, round-up hunts, on the occasion of the consecration of the banner, the wedding of the ruler, the birth of his heir, etc.

Nowadays about 40 types of **equestrian games** can be observed in Kazakhstan. It includes horse racing, *zhorga* (a horsemanship demonstration), *kokpar* (a game where players try to capture a goat carcass; the Kyrgyz style of it is inscribed to the UNESCO Representative List), and *kyz kuu* (a game where a young man tries to catch a girl on horseback). These most popular games can be added with the list of over than 20 equestrian games with a visible presence of martial arts: saddling a horse, *audaryspak* (a game where two riders try to flip each other off their horses), tug-of-war, and other. There are also games linked to rites and rituals: bone stealing, *tabak tartu* (a game where a rider attempts to take a plate from a pole), and several household type's games: *arkan tartu* (lassoing), *bugalyk* (bridling, or bringing a horse under control), and throwing a *shalm* (a type of felt hat). There is an ancient game called *mushe shabu* or *mushe tartu* game (gift racing or gift receiving). Young men, *zhigits* approach girls or young women and asking for a gift. They mention the girl's own name or the name of the bride selected by her. The invited girl then chases after the *zhigit*. The term *mushe* refers to the gift that the *zhigit* receives from the girl. In *Qyz qashsar* game two families compete over a girl [2]. Playing *Qamshy tartu* the rider must throw the whip so that it lands on the line, which is drawn on the ground. Participants ride off for several hundred meters and then race towards the target. *Salma* is one of the martial arts competitions where three participants agree on the weapon to be used for the fight, such as a club, a mace, a whip, etc. The competition takes place on horseback, and the losers are gradually eliminated until the only one winner remains.

The history of **bow and arrow** goes back to prehistoric times. The oldest known bows were made of elm around 6000 BC and of yew around 3300 BC. It is known that there are two main type of archery bows based on material and method of bow-making: self-bow and composite-bow [3,4]. Composite archery bows have been well known and used by Asiatic societies for thousands of years [5]. The Turkic composite bow, made of wood, horn, sinew and glue - is one of the most famous and powerful bows in the world. To construct this type of bow, sinew was glued to the back (tension side) and horn to the belly (compression side) of preferred wooden core [6,7].

Sadaq Atu is an ancient art of shooting the horsebow by the Kazakh nomads (sadaq – bow). The horsebow and arrows played a leading role in Kazakh war equipment, as a distance combat weaponry complex. In this light, the understanding of the art of making and shooting the Kazakh horsebow is becoming a very important subject for the cultural identification of Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, today it is practically lost.

Most known Kazakh horsebows belong to two types: lesser and large horsebows. Both types are composite recurved horsebows. Kazakh horsebows were made of wooden base, enforced with sinew, working in tension, on the side opposite to the shooter; and the horn plates on the side facing the shooter, working in compression. The shooting from Kazakh horsebows was done using so-called Kazakh Draw (Mongol Draw). With this draw the string is held and drawn by a right hand's thumb, and the arrow is placed on the bow grip from the right side. For protection of thumb the Kazakh archers wore special rings – thumb rings [8]. Kazakh bows were designed and made specifically for shooting from a horseback. It required high level of training and coordination of the warriors. The origin of this nomadic martial art was within the *Salburyn* - winter hunting festival, the field school of martial arts and army cooperation. Like other Central Asian nomads, the Kazakhs used the Parthian Shot. This is when the mounted archer shoots rearwards on the move, with the twist of his torso. However, due to historical circumstances, the knowledge of this once widespread Kazakh tradition was almost lost by the dawn of the twentieth century. However, hundred years later, the horseback archery is undergoing the dynamic revival in many countries, including Kazakhstan. The National Sadaq Atu Federation was established in 2019 by less than 50 archery enthusiasts. Now, in five years later, the national Sadaq Atu federation consists of 2,000 adult members and has its branches and clubs over the whole Kazakhstan.

*Qazaq Quresi* (**traditional wrestling**) is a type of wrestling that requires players to battle it out on foot, the objective being to get the opponent's shoulders on the ground. It is a traditional practice where trainers would coach young boys who would then take part in local contests. These days, *quresi* in Kazakhstan is a national sport practised by men and women, up to professional level. International competitions also take place, such as the annual tournament the *Kazakhstan Barysy*, which normally broadcast in more than 100 countries. Sports clubs, which may also be affiliated to schools, ensure the transmission of *quresi* in Kazakhstan, as well as via master classes run by experienced *quresi* wrestlers. The minimum age of learners can be as young as 10 and no restrictions apply concerning the background of participants. There are 10 clubs and 13 sports schools at the moment in Kazakhstan. *Qazaq Quresi* also has a place in traditional folklore in Kazakhstan. The wrestlers, known as *Baluans*, have been regarded as strong and courageous and depicted as such in epics, poetry and literature. It also helps to build tolerance, goodwill and solidarity amongst communities.

The importance of *Qazaq Quresi* in traditional sports is mainly conditioned by the increased interest of population in national culture; its contribution to national heritage preservation and revival, to cultural restoring and education.

The Kazakh people call as *Batyr* who are engaged in wrestling, who have mastered the art of wrestling, their courage and bravery. The word *Batyr* entered to the Turkic languages from Persian, this word has the meaning 'wrestler'. In the old Turkic language, there is a term '*Alyp*'. The scientist Alkey Margulan connects the origin of the word *Batyr* with the concept of 'balbal' (stone figure): a big, strong, giant man. Kazakhs use this word to name a 'big, strong man, authoritative among the people, strong, supporter' [10]. In the past, wrestlers to improve their strength and fighting skills lifted heavy stones, objects, and livestock with other people. Stones raised by wrestlers are called '*Baluan taş*'.

Traditional women's wrestling competitions are prominent in the cultures of Asian and European peoples. Women's wrestling is a remnant of ancient ritual mysteries dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Today, they are present among more than thirty nations worldwide. Among the Turkic-Mongolian cultural sphere, women's wrestling competitions continue to maintain their significance. They have been documented in ethnographic contemporary times among the Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Crimean Tatars, Kyrgyz, Tuvans, Yakuts and Mongols.

Wrestling competition between a young man and a woman within the context of marriage games are represented across the vast Eurasian space in historical retrospectives. Descriptions of these matches are found in the epic heritage of equestrian peoples—Germanic and Turkic epics. One of the vivid historical evidences about them is the story of Khutulun-Chaha (Tutulan-aga), the great-granddaughter of Genghis Khan. The tradition of mixed matches remains resilient in contemporary ethnography.

The memory of women's wrestling, including *audaryspak* (mounted wrestling), serves not only the safeguarding of this phenomenon but also its relevance as part of the heritage of equestrian peoples. In Kazakhstan women's wrestling, *Qatyn qures*, was historically an integral part of calendrical and funerary rituals. Even at Soviet era, *Qatyn qures* was included in the program of the *Shopan Toi* local rural festival. But, unlike ancient traditions of the Kazakhs, young women are prohibited from participating in matches.

Games and sports related to the nomadic culture reflects the traditions in the immensity of the Great steppe. Originated during the Mongolian and the Golden Horde eras, these games are now cultural projects deserving competition, and, moreover, ethnic identity. Kazakhstan, in its partnership with other Central Asia states, tries to improve its identity and to promote an image outside this region.

At present the traditional sports and games in Kazakhstan are integrated to the national sport and physical training system. They play an important role in youth mobilizing, promoting healthy lifestyle, cultivating the patriotic education and the respect of national history and traditions. Annually there are up to a thousand various traditional sports competitions overall the country, such as a *Qazaq Quresi*, *Togyzqumalaq*, *Asyk Atu*, *Qoqpar*, *Baiga*, *Tenge alu*, *Jamba Atu*, *Audaryspaq*, *Qusbegilik*, *traditional archery* and *Zhekpe-Zhek*. All these sports are officially recognized and inscribed to the National Register of Sports of Kazakhstan.

Martial arts first appeared as a human surviving tool and transferred to a powerful socialization, education and person's moral ethics development tool nowadays. Hence, martial arts came a long way and continue playing the significant role in modern Kazakhstan society.

**Pictures (see attached)**

### References

- [1] Kylassov A.V. Identity of fairs and traditional games, or Emporium Chuvash Pedagogical University Newsletter: 1-1 (77) 119-123, 2013
- [2] Tocktabay A. The Equestrian World of Qazaqs. Almaty: Almaty Kitap Baspasy. 496, 2022
- [3] Clark G., Piggott, S. Prehistoric Societies. London: Hutchinson 1965
- [4] Fadala S. Traditional Archery. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books. 1999
- [5] Grayson C.E., French M., O'Brien M.J. Traditional Archery from Six Continents. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press 2007
- [6] Gündüz G. *et al* (2013): Anatomy of Wooden Core of Ottoman Composite Archery Bows. Sains Malaysiana 42 (5), 547–552, 2013
- [7] Yücel, Ü. *Türk Okçuluğu*. Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Başkanlığı Yayınları. Ankara. 600, 1999
- [8] Baidaralın D.Zh. Sadaqshiliq – The Art of Making and Shooting the Kazakh Horsebow. CAJAS 2 (1), 42-53. 2017
- [9] Baidaralın D.Zh. Sadaqshiliq – The Art of Making and Shooting the Kazakh Horsebow. CAJAS 2 (1), 42-53. 2017
- [10] Türkmen M., Arstanbekov S. Kazakh traditional wrestling with its formation and transformation aspects: Kyres (Küres). EJPPESS 8 (6), 78-89. 2020. 10.46827/ejpe.v6i8.3410..

### Pictures



Picture 1. Place of the Opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Nomad Games (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 2. Opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Nomad Games (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 3. Opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Nomad Games (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 4. Presidents and Honorable Guests at the Opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Nomad Games (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 5. National delegations at the parade at the Opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Nomad Games (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 6. Qusbegilik Masters (Falconers) (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 7. Kazakh Horse Riders (8 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)



Picture 8. Final Round of Traditional Archery Competition (10 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)





Picture 9. Adyryspak – Horseback Wrestling (10 September 2024, Astana, Kazakhstan)