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Modernization and Cultural Heritage in Kazakhstan: Finding the Balance

By the Royal Thai Embassy in Astana

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Kazakhstan is currently undergoing significant modernization and integration into the global community, showcasing its vibrant culture. As it embraces innovation and the multifaceted dynamics of the 21st century, it is crucial for Kazakhstan to maintain a balance and actively work to uphold and promote its rich cultural heritage, thereby enhancing its national identity and gaining international recognition.

Cultural Heritage of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's culture has many wonderful things, such as art, traditions, and the history of its nomadic people. This history started a long time ago, around the end of the Bronze Age, which was between the 9th and 7th centuries. For many years, people called nomads lived in the Kazakh steppes. Over the years, they have developed their own special way of seeing the world, along with customs and traditions, which are still valued and kept alive. Some important symbols of this culture are the Kazakh yurt, horse games, and traditional Kazakh clothing.



A Kazakh yurt is a handy and practical home that is easy to set up and move when traveling between grazing areas. A Kazakh yurt is made up of three wooden parts: the “kerege” lattices that form the walls, the “yuk” poles that create the dome, and the round top called “shanyrak,” which is like a ceiling window and let’s smoke out. Also, special care was given to the designs and decorations inside the yurt.

For the Kazakh people, the yurt represents comfort, a link to the earth and the universe, and reminds them of their nomadic history. It is still an important part of Kazakh culture, showing the rich history of their ancestors.



For a nomad, being able to ride a horse was very important. A horse was not just a way to travel; it was a loyal friend and part of the family. Because of this, horse racing is an important part of Kazakh life. Long ago, one of the most loved activities for the Kazakhs was chasing wolves. A group of horse riders would chase the wolf, and the quickest rider would hit it with a club to catch it. Later, this game was called

Kokpar, which comes from the old Turkic words “kok boru,” meaning “blue wolf.” Eventually, the wolf was swapped out for a dead goat. This old nomad game has become popular around the

world – today, many countries play Kokpar. In distant America, a group of cowboys from North America has come together and often takes part in the World Nomad Games.



Kazakh national clothing is more than just clothes; it tells the story of the land, the lifestyle, and the traditions of our ancestors. Men and women wore different types of clothes. Men typically wore a long robe called a chapan, which was tied with a belt, and a hat. The hat could be a skullcap, a felt hat, or a fur hat with earflaps, depending on the weather and event. Women usually wore long dresses. and a traditional and elegant hat called a saukele.



In the 19th and 20th centuries, many Kazakhs started to move from a nomadic way of life to living permanently in one place. This change brought new cultural elements to Kazakh society. This process brought big changes in society and culture: cities grew, crafts improved, education became more common, and new styles of art and everyday life emerged. The mix of old traditions and new cultural ideas caught the interest of people around the world. There are 265 important historical and cultural sites in the country.

About 12,000 sites are considered important on a local level. In 2025, the Ministry of Culture and Information added two new entries to the UNESCO World Heritage Center. The first nomination is called “Rock Mosques of the Mangystau Peninsula.” It features five underground mosques: Beket ata, Karaman ata, Shopan ata, Shakpak Ata, and Sultan epe. The second nomination is called “Silk Road: Ferghana-Syrdarya Corridor.” It was created with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This nomination includes six old towns: Otyrar, Sauran, Yasi, Syganak, Zhankent, and important sites in the Zhetyasar area. Many elements of Kazakhstan’s culture and historical monuments are included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Among them are:

- The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in the city of Turkestan – one of the largest and most renowned mausoleums in Central Asia. Built in the 14th century, it serves as a major pilgrimage site for Muslims from around the world.
- The Tamgaly Petroglyphs in East Kazakhstan – a complex of ancient rock carvings dating back more than 5,000 years. The petroglyphs depict scenes from the lives of ancient people, as well as animals and mythical creatures.
- The Silk Roads: the Chang’an–Tianshan Corridor – a collection of ancient cities, caravanserais, fortresses, and other monuments that testify to Kazakhstan’s role as a key trade center along the historic Silk Road.
- Saryarka – Steppe and Lakes of Northern Kazakhstan – a unique natural region encompassing vast steppes, lakes, rivers, and mountain ranges. Saryarka is home to many rare and endangered species of plants and animals.

Modernization of Kazakhstan

- 1st Modernization (1991–1997)

The first modernization began after Kazakhstan became an independent country in 1991. During this period, the main goal was to move from a planned economy to a market economy. This stage helped to build a new economic system and form the foundations of the modern Kazakh state.

- 2nd Modernization (from 1997 – 2000s)

The second modernization started with the launch of the national strategy “Kazakhstan–2030” in 1997. It also included the construction of a new capital city, Astana (now Astana again, formerly Nur-Sultan). This period focused on strategic development, modernization of infrastructure, and political transformation.

- 3rd Modernization (from 2017 – present)

The third modernization began in 2017. Its goal is to create a new model of economic growth based on innovation, technology, and digitalization. This stage aims to keep Kazakhstan competitive in the global economy and is a strong step toward the goals of “Kazakhstan–2050” Strategy.

Modernization is closely linked with the digitalization of the economy, education, and governance, which enhances Kazakhstan’s efficiency, transparency, and competitiveness. The transition to digital technologies opens new opportunities for youth, science, and business, integrating the country into the global information space. A special role in this process is played by the megacities of Astana and Almaty, which have become centers of innovation, education, culture, and international cooperation. Their rapid development symbolizes the modern face of Kazakhstan a dynamic, open, and technologically advanced state. Modernization reveals the importance and importance of interethnic stability and tolerance, and the deepening of democratic processes in society. The program article by N.A. Nazarbayev “Seven Facets of the Great Steppe”, published on November 21, 2018, identified the fundamental directions of modernization of historical consciousness. The article defines the relevance and necessity of modernizing the historical consciousness of society. An important aspect of it is the study and research of the national history and cultural and historical heritage of the people. For this purpose, such large-scale projects as “Archive – 2025”, “Great Names of the Great Steppe”, “Genesis of the Turkic World”, “Museum of Ancient Art and Technology of the Great Steppe”, “A Thousand Years of Steppe Folklore and Music”, “History in cinema and on television” are designated. These projects are a continuation of the “Rukhani Zhangyru” Program.

Ways to Achieve Balance

- Cultural Policy Framework

The Concept of Cultural Policy of Kazakhstan (2023–2029) sets directions to combine modernization (education, digital technologies, creative industries) with preservation of cultural heritage (historical sites, language, national identity, intangible traditions).

- Education and Cultural Transmission

Integrating subjects like history, folklore, music, traditional crafts, and language diversity into education fosters knowledge and emotional connection to national culture.

- Support for Arts and Crafts

Government grants, festivals, workshops, and creative labs help preserve traditional skills and pass them from masters to younger generations.

- Digital and Technological Initiatives

VR museums, digital archives, virtual tours, online exhibitions, and multimedia projects make cultural heritage widely accessible nationally and internationally.

- Ethnotourism and Sustainable Cultural Business

Ethno-villages, folk festivals, craft centers, and gastronomic tours combine economic growth with preservation, promoting Kazakh culture globally.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan is currently trying to grow and modernize while still keeping its special cultural traditions from the past. Cultural heritage is important for a country's identity and helps people feel connected to their history and each other. In this context, it's important to realize that we can improve and modernize without forgetting our history. It can be done by carefully mixing our traditions with new technologies, education, and ideas. Instead of picking between the past and the future, the country is finding a way to bring them together in the present. This helps create a balanced society where memories from history, spiritual beliefs, and modern ideas can all live together and support one another. Kazakhstan aims to carefully protect its culture while also modernizing. It wants to build a society and start programs that help keep its unique traditions alive. This method helps build a strong national identity and allows us to pass it on to future generations.

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