

The Embodied Experience of Kazakh Folk Dance Art: Self-actualization Through Reconnecting to Nomadic Heritage in Urban Contexts

Master Thesis

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Managing Art and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets (MAGMa)

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Date: June 13, 2025



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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis explores how the embodied practice of Kazakh folk dance fosters self-actualization by reconnecting individuals with their nomadic heritage in contemporary urban settings. At the core of the study lies a deep dive into the dance as a multilayered cultural practice, the value of which extends far beyond aesthetic appreciation. Each movement is seen as a vessel of intergenerational systems of thought and belief, capable not only of preserving tradition, but also of embodying and continuing it as a lived experience.

The research is structured around three interrelated dimensions. First, focusing on the affective and cognitive levels of engagement, it positions dance as a form of self-expression that cultivates bodily awareness and emotional resilience. Second, it explores cultural rediscovery by demonstrating how Kazakh folk dance, rooted in a nomadic worldview and lifestyle, serves as a visual manifestation of spiritual ancestral heritage, one that is comprehended by practitioners through physical practice. Third, in seeking to understand the interpretive dimensions of the practice, the study looks at the importance of the choreographer's role in mediating tradition through storytelling and movement.

Framed through the lens of living heritage, this thesis sees dance as a dynamic site for intersection of individual and collective, then and now, body and culture. It aligns with the Cultural Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029, which highlights the relevance of various traditional forms of artistic expression, including folk dance, in strengthening national identity and cultivating creative capacity within society, thereby contributing to collective consciousness and well-being. Yet, despite its recognition as an important element of cultural heritage, the transformative social potential of Kazakh folk dance remains underexplored, particularly in relation to its practice as an amateur leisure activity. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge the gap by employing a human-centered approach.

As a further point, qualitative fieldwork involves participant observation and semi-structured interviews with three groups of Kazakh dance practitioners: amateurs, professional choreographers, and academic researchers. Based on this material, the study identifies eight key pathways through which self-actualization through dance is, indeed, realized: (1) Identity and self-expression, (2) Immersive engagement and transformation of perception, (3) Spirituality, (4) Cultural awakening, (5) Kazakh dance as an embodied expression of ancestral knowledge, (6) Music and attire, (7) Choreographer as storyteller: dance as destiny and mission, (8) Dance as the heritage of the future.

For participants of various ethnic backgrounds, dance becomes a space where personal experience, the desire to better understand oneself and one's roots, and a longing to belong, particularly within the hybrid identity shaped by Kazakhstan's multiethnic history, form a strong

motivation to engage with the dance. In this process, the combination of symbolic depth and physical intensity becomes a tool for exploring questions that have not yet been verbalized. Several participants described a strong internal pull toward culture in all its forms, while professional practitioners and scholars emphasized their deeper mission to facilitate the process of initiating others into it. In this vein, it becomes evident that the nation is undergoing a process of cultural reimagination, as it moves away from inherited frameworks of imperial and Soviet thinking. Within this process, dance is instrumental, and spirituality, although interpreted differently by each individual, emerges as a central theme.

In this context, the research revealed a broader understanding of spirituality, which was initially associated with harmony with nature. This harmony is not simply a return to nature as a separate realm, but rather an experience of integration with the world as it is lived day to day. In this sense, self-actualization occurs not only through connection with heritage, but through the creation of a dialogue with its many facets, which allows individuals to draw from it what resonates most with them. This underscores the importance of the human factor and subjective judgements.

The study also revealed a deep sense of responsibility and a strong desire to preserve this artistic tradition for future generations, as well as to exercise agency in shaping its development while maintaining its core values and concepts. Although this question goes beyond the scope of the present research, it offers significant potential for future inquiry. As a result, the findings offer new insights for scholars, demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the topic, and lay the groundwork for more detailed future research on this embodied cultural practice.

Keywords: Embodiment, Kazakh folk dance, intangible cultural heritage, self-actualization, urban life

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During the research process for this master's thesis, the author, as a representative of the Kazakh ethnic group, discovered not only a wealth of new knowledge about folk dance traditions but also gained deeper insight into herself. Each session attended and every interview conducted resonated like a form of therapy, filled with genuine emotions, reflections, and lived experiences. Culture, as a multifaceted spectrum of human experience, is perhaps never more essential than in times of upheaval and uncertainty. Only by returning to it can we return to ourselves and foster sustainable personal and collective growth. At such moments, a quote from the film 'Dead Poets Society' brightly echoes in my mind: "And medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love – these are what we stay alive for".

As a Kazakh woman, I come from a nomadic tradition rooted in harmony with nature – a bond fractured by colonization, Soviet assimilation, and environmental disasters such as the Aral Sea crisis. Both Kazakhstan and I are on a path of restoration, and this shared journey fuels my commitment to community-based heritage enrichment. This thesis is one more step toward that goal. None of this would have been possible without the immense support, inspiration, and ongoing interest in the topic shown by my supervisor Frans Brouwer. I am deeply grateful for his guidance, and, most importantly, for the understanding and uplifting spirit that helped me keep going even in moments of doubt.

I would also like to express my profound appreciation to the administration and academic staff of the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Managing Art and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets. Without exaggeration, MAGMa is the best thing that has ever happened in my life, and I truly believe in its powerful and positive social impact.

Equally invaluable was the contribution of all research participants, who not only offered their time and energy but also gave a part of themselves to this study, making it even more unique. In this context, I am especially grateful to the administration of the 'Open Ballet' dance studio and choreographer of Kazakh folk dance lessons, whose work makes an outstanding contribution to the popularization of this traditional artistic form.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to my family, friends, and colleagues for their support – both physical and moral.

INTRODUCTION

1. Problem statement and research question

Kazakh folk dance, *bi*, serves as a language of movement that intertwines grace, plasticity, and expressiveness. This art form reflects not only the aesthetic and spiritual essence of nomadic life but also functions as a repository of collective knowledge and memory, passed down through generations (Abirov, 1997; Sarynova, 1974; Mosiienko, 2016). However, the rapid urbanization and modern sedentary lifestyles in Kazakhstan have weakened the connection between contemporary society and its cultural roots (Kulbekova, 2008-a). Which, in turn, challenges the transmission and relevance of folk dance in the present context – not only as an important element of intangible heritage but also as a means of self-actualization, particularly in cosmopolitan context.

Therefore, this research seeks to address the central question: How does the embodied practice of Kazakh folk dance enable self-actualization by reconnecting individuals with their intangible cultural heritage in contemporary urban settings? To further explore, the following sub-questions are proposed: (1) How does the performance of specific dance elements foster self-actualization among practitioners? (2) How does the physical practice of these movements cultivate a spiritual connection to ancestral nomadic heritage? (3) What role does the choreographer play as a storyteller in conveying the meaning behind the dance?

Building on this, the relationship between the sub-questions and the central research question can be outlined as follows. The first sub-question directly brings up the emotional and cognitive dimensions of engaging with dance. It addresses the self-actualization component by examining how movements, specific to Kazakh folk dance, function as a means of personal fulfillment and self-expression. The second sub-question then shifts from the personal experience of self-actualization to a broader cultural reconnection. Since Kazakh folk dance is deeply tied to nomadic traditions, the physical act of dancing can evoke a sense of embodied ancestral knowledge and spirituality. Finally, the third sub-question introduces the interpretive and pedagogical dimensions of Kazakh folk dance. While self-actualization occurs at an individual level, the choreographer's role is instrumental in transmitting the meanings embedded in dance movements. The way dance is taught and framed can strongly influence how it is understood, which makes storytelling an essential part of dance as a living heritage practice.

2. Purpose of the study

This thesis, therefore, aims to understand how traditional art forms can maintain their relevance in a rapidly evolving modern society. Kazakh folk dance, as an ideal subject, provides a lens through

which to analyze cultural continuity through embodied practices and explore its role as a tool for self-actualization, ultimately contributing to enhanced well-being, amidst the fast-paced rhythms of urban life. By doing so, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the instrumental value of intangible cultural heritage, particularly its ability to nurture spirituality in connection with nature, central to the nomadic ethos (Masanov, 1995).

Furthermore, the author's motivation for exploring this topic is deeply tied to a personal connection with dance, nurtured through years of participating in extracurricular activities during elementary and secondary school. These early experiences sparked a lifelong appreciation for the emotional depth of this traditional art form, where every movement carries special meaning and value (Kulbekova, 2008-b). Over time, this curiosity has grown into a keen interest in exploring how tradition, modernity, and personal experience intersect.

In this vein, the author believes that the private dance school 'Open Ballet' emerges as a particularly relevant case study, since it welcomes recreational practitioners of all ages to engage with Kazakh folk dance in ways that are meaningful to them personally. Founded in the summer of 2016 by Madina Iksanova in Almaty, Kazakhstan's cultural capital and largest city, 'Open Ballet' initially offered ballet classes for children and adults of all skill levels. This inclusive approach particularly appealed to many women who wished to practice ballet but were discouraged by prevailing stereotypes, such as the notion that serious engagement with ballet must begin in early childhood or that it necessitates an idealized body type and exceptional flexibility. The studio gradually broadened its repertoire to include contemporary dance, yoga, and other dance styles (Batskikh and Mukitanova, 2020). It was also among the first to offer Kazakh folk dance classes to all interested participants, regardless of background or experience.

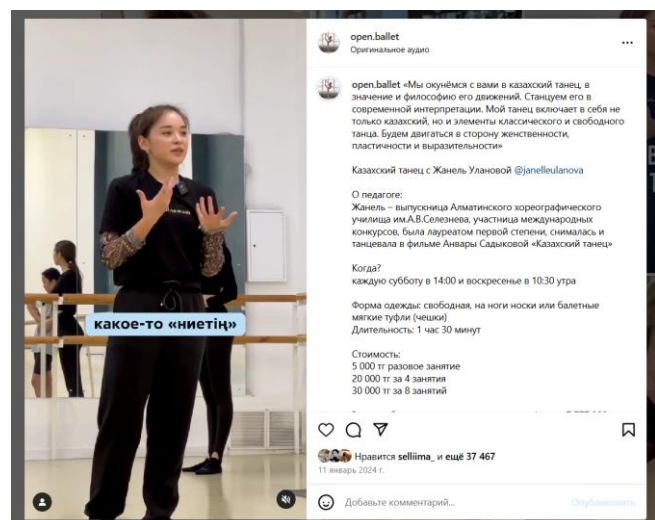


Image courtesy: (1) The school's ballet students, photographed by 'Open Ballet' Studio for 'The Village Kazakhstan' portal.

(2) Kazakh dance classes, screenshot from the 'Open Ballet' Instagram profile.

3. Scientific and social relevance

Kulbekova (2008-a), in her study on the challenges facing Kazakh folk dance in the 21st century, identified several factors contributing to the estrangement between modern Kazakhstanis and their cultural heritage. Once an integral part of the daily lives of the nomadic tribes, particularly in shamanistic rituals, Kazakh folk dance was majorly affected by the forced transition from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle initiated by Imperial Russia and later reinforced under Soviet rule. Consequently, Soviet cultural policies, aimed at assimilation and the homogenization of traditional practices, further disrupted this art form by altering it to align with the demands of staged performances (Sadykova, 2019; Yerofeyeva and Usmanova, 2014). This often came at the expense of the dances' spiritual and symbolic essence. While professional choreography and Kazakh ballet advanced during this period, folk dance was relegated to children's educational programs, with minimal opportunities for adult amateur engagement. This lack of accessibility and broader participation resulted in a gap in the practice of Kazakh folk dance today (Kulbekova, 2008-c).

Over and above, Kulbekova (2008-a) points to globalization and the growing appeal of modern dance styles, such as hip-hop and K-pop, as key factors behind the shift in interests, whereas Orynbasar (2019) suggests that the core issue is not simply about people choosing alternative forms: it is the lack of opportunities to connect with and experience traditional practices of artistic expression. In general, folk dance is either treated as an archaistic subject of academic study or as a form of compulsory extracurricular activity for the elementary and secondary schoolers, but not as a compelling and relevant medium for realizing self. Moreover, Kulbekova (2008-b) identified the absence of comprehensive teaching methodologies, while Spinjar and Amreeva (2022) pointed to a shortage of trained specialists, as substantial barriers to making Kazakh folk dance an accessible cultural practice in modern Kazakhstan. Such methodologies are essential for preserving the full sense of this centuries-old art form, which demands a deeper intellectual and physical involvement from its practitioners.

Interestingly, the developmental trajectory of Kazakh folk dance aligns with Georgios's (2018) research on the evolution of traditional dances under contemporary sociocultural and political influences. Georgios distinguishes between their "first existence", where dance is an organic part of community life transmitted through direct experience, and their "second existence", where it is standardized and commercialized, mainly due to adaptation for stage performances. To preserve the authenticity of the "first existence", he advocates for education, based on integrating music and movement, and creative dance methods that promote cultural identity, social skills, and the continuation of dance traditions, particularly in academic settings. Similarly, Kazakh folk dance is widely regarded by the prominent researchers in the field, including aforementioned Kulbekova

(2008-b), Sarynova (1974) and Tleubayev (2013), as a visual manifestation of the historical memory and shared artistic spirit of the Kazakh people. Thus, it allows for the dance to foster a sense of community, provide opportunities for creative and aesthetic growth, and serve as a channel for spiritual renewal. This view is supported by the scholars, such as Block and Kissell (2001), Ness (2004), Buckland (2001), and Schwender (2018), who also affirm the socio-cultural value of traditional dance, particularly its ability to enhance well-being and strengthen cultural identity: the embodied, physical nature of dance uniquely allows practitioners to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their heritage.

In this context, the use of term ‘self-actualization’ is proposed, as it encapsulates the gaining of multidimensional awareness of one’s self, discovering one’s true self and expressing it (Yahid, 2019). Avalon (2006) likewise concludes that art activates all levels of the human personality (physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual), and that this activation, in turn, initiates therapeutic or educational processes. In the context of dance, this view is supported by Vancea (2013), who argues that participation in body-movement practices not only enhances bodily satisfaction but also fosters the development of emotional intelligence. Ultimately, as Manheim (2013) suggests, this process forms the transformative core that enables the realization of a healthy and integrated self through emotional regulation and the pursuit of meaning.

As a further point, this study holds particular relevance within the framework of Kazakhstan’s national priorities, as outlined in the Concept of Cultural Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029, which emphasizes the active engagement with intangible and tangible cultural heritage. Example of the inclusion of the ‘Orteke’ performance on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage demonstrates the potential of Kazakh dance to support the ongoing process of nation-building through crafting a cohesive and inclusive cultural identity, as well as a tool of cultural branding to solidify international standing (Press Service of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.).



Video courtesy: Example of the ‘Orteke’ performance by Khassen Tolganay, from Khassen’s personal YouTube channel [YouTube].

However, a deeper examination of the renewed policy reveals its broader implications. Increasingly recognizing the win-win scenario of investing in culture – as both a vital component of sustainable economic transformation and a way to enhance the high moral, aesthetic, and intellectual potential of individuals and society at large – the state is laying the supportive groundwork for the development of creative industries. Such an environment implies synergy between the public and private sectors in shaping diverse leisure activities that integrate the country’s creative potential,

rooted in shared heritage, into everyday life. These practices foster cultural exchange, self-expression, and personal growth, while also reinforcing a collective sense of belonging and cultural identity. Ultimately, this is seen as a key pathway toward achieving the central objective of the national policy: the improvement of social well-being (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

In this regard, numerous studies provide empirical support for the logic of this approach. For example, Brajsa-Žganec, Merkaš, and Šverko (2011) explore the role of leisure activities as an important resource capable of fulfilling both basic and psychological needs, thus contributing to a higher quality of life in line with individuals' subjective assessments of well-being. Similarly, Sirgy, Uysal, and Kruger (2017) emphasize the multi-layered structure of leisure satisfaction and its relationship with broader perceptions of quality of life, grounding their model in a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, including Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs.

Iwasaki (2007), in turn, provides a comprehensive evaluation of leisure as a space for meaning-making that contributes to quality of life. Notably, his work incorporates perspectives across diverse socio-cultural and international contexts through an extensive review of literature. The key mechanisms he identifies include mental health and positive emotions, sense of self, belonging, cognitive engagement and skill acquisition, environmental awareness, and sociocultural empowerment. The latter is especially relevant in the postcolonial context of Kazakhstan. Iwasaki presents numerous examples of research highlighting the role of creative practices, including dance, as a means of reconnecting with ancestral worldviews and identities through tradition-based communication with the environment. Supporting this perspective, studies by Salzman and Halloran (2004), Lopez et al. (2002), and Wearing (1998) show that First Nations peoples around the world in contexts such as Australia, Hawai'i, Brazil, and Alaska draw upon traditional artistic practices such as music, crafts, and rituals to sustain resilience and cultural continuity. These practices cultivate pride, enhance self-esteem, and promote a strong sense of identity. In these cases, the term "leisure" becomes inadequate, as such creative expressions are not viewed as separate from life, but rather as life itself.

In a similar vein, the growing presence of private dance schools, such as the previously mentioned 'Open Ballet', which offers Kazakh folk dance lessons to a wider audience, represents not only a new leisure practice but also a potential indication of increasing public interest in engaging with traditional cultural forms. However, this aspect, along with the genuine role of Kazakh folk dance in the lives of modern Kazakhstanis, remains insufficiently studied. Thus, the author aims to bridge the gap and examine the folk dance as a medium for improving individual's quality of life, particularly among amateur practitioners, by offering a path to navigate modern urban life through a harmonious spiritual connection with the world around. Which, in turn, embodies the very essence of

ancestral nomadic wisdom – intangible cultural heritage of the nation. In addition, the knowledge embedded in dance practice is a valuable cultural capital, transmitted by the choreographer within a small-scale commercial structure. This process generates a unique cultural “product” with the potential to shape public consciousness, thereby fostering conditions that support the development of a socioeconomically sustainable and culturally vibrant community rooted in shared values.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

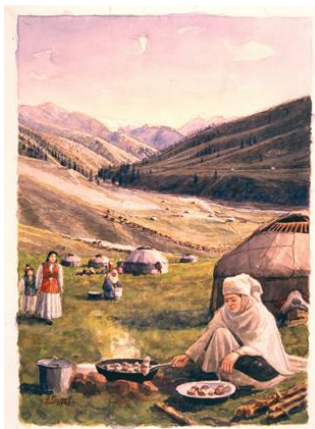
1. Contextual background

1.1 Brief introduction to Kazakhstan

In addition to being Kazakhstan's native population, the Kazakh people constitute the country's ethnic majority. Although Russian is still widely spoken throughout the nation, Kazakh, a language belonging to the Turkic language family, is the official state language. While the Kazakh Khanate, the first Kazakh state, was founded in 1465, the ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people has a far longer history that was influenced by Central Asia's larger sociopolitical changes. Their ancestry extends back to the early Turkic and Kipchak confederations, the Saka, the Huns, and ultimately to the Mongol Empire. Additional layers of sociopolitical and cultural change were brought about by the Russian Empire's subsequent colonization and the Kazakh SSR's accession to the Soviet Union (Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, n.d.). Consequently, Kazakhstan gained independence on December 16, 1991, and is a democratic, secular, and unitary state characterized by extensive ethnocultural, linguistic, religious, and racial diversity (Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d).

1.2 Nomadic influences on Kazakh dance traditions

As a further point, Kazakh culture is profoundly shaped by its nomadic heritage, which is, to illustrate, reflected in traditional architectural form of a portable dwelling – the yurt¹, as well as intricate tribal structures², oral literature, and, undoubtedly, dance. Sarynova (1974), a leading scholar



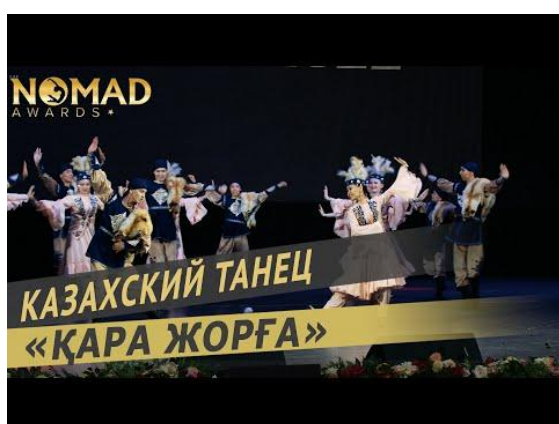
¹The yurt is a round, frame-based dwelling covered with felt or leather, designed for easy assembly and disassembly, making it ideally suited for a nomadic lifestyle. At the heart of the yurt is the Shanyrak – a round, lattice-like crosspiece that not only physically supports the structure by holding the side elements together but also carries significant symbolic meaning. Due to its cultural importance, the Shanyrak is featured in the state emblem of Kazakhstan (Egizbayeva, 2016).

² The first state formation of the Kazakhs (Kazakh Khanate) was traditionally divided into three Jüz, tribal unions of Kazakh clans, along with two clans that were not part of the Jüz system. A Kazakh clan, in turn, signifies belonging to a specific ancestral group, with approximately 200 clans recorded (Ayagan, 2004).

Image courtesy: (1) ‘Zhailau Asy’ painting by A. Kasteev (1961), where the yurt is featured on the background, from the official catalog of the A. Kasteev State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

(2) Interior of a yurt, from the website of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan.

in Kazakh folk choreography, characterizes Kazakh folk dance as an “ethnic code” that embodies the history, lifestyle, and spiritual ideals of the nomadic Kazakh people. Tleubayev (2013) and Kulbekova (2008-b) continue to provide further evidence by means of tracing Kazakh folk dance back through early Turkic tribes to the Kingdom of the Sakas and stressing its resilience as a vehicle for cultural continuity in spite of radical socio-cultural and political changes (Orynbasar and Ovanesyan, 2019). Tanbayeva, Saitova, and Dzhumaseitova (2022), building on the works of Vsevolodskaya-Golushkevich, prominent researcher and choreographer, describe how Kazakh folk dance, emerging from the rhythms of nomadic life, accompanied people through rituals, ceremonies, and daily activities. Distinct types of dances embody different moods and purposes, such as ‘Örmek bi’, a weaver’s dance, and ‘Qysbegy-dayypaz’, a hunting dance mimicking falcon training. Inspired by their natural surroundings, for instance, dynamic and upbeat ‘Qara Jorga’ imitates the motion of a running horse, which once again reflects the nomads’ spiritual and practical connection to the natural world.



Video and image courtesy: (1) ‘Qara Jorga’ dance video, published by ‘NOMAD’ Choreography Academy [YouTube].

(2) Illustration of the ‘Qara Jorga’ dance performed in a yurt to the accompaniment of the traditional Kazakh instrument, dombra, from Gustav-Theodor Pauli’s ‘Ethnographic description of the Peoples of Russian Empire’ (1862).

Kasteyeva and Bakirova (2019) explore the profound connection to shamanistic traditions rooted in the medieval Turkic-Mongol belief systems of Central Asia – Tengrianism. Central to these traditions is the earth goddess Umai, revered as the source of all life and the consort of the sky god Tengri. The authors underscore the significance of spirituality as an inseparable element of nomadism, itself a vital component of the nation’s intangible cultural heritage. This spirituality is deeply intertwined with nature, not merely as a result of the nomadic lifestyle’s fluid perception of time and

its alignment with the spontaneous rhythms of the vast steppes, but also through a belief in ‘Aruakhs’, ancestral spirits who guide and support the living, yet do so only when harmony with the surrounding world is maintained (Begalinova and Kokumbayev, 2017). In this regard, Sadykova (2019) highlights the important role of baksi – shamans for whom dance functioned as a ritual-sacred way of entering into contact with the spirit world to draw their strength. In shamanic practice, various free-flowing, circular movements, such as body and hand rotations, embodied intentions, including healing the sick. Here, the author wishes to draw particular attention to the cultural importance of circularity and cyclicity for Kazakhs. Sadykova (2019), for example, references the twelve-year cycle of time reckoning – mushel. The minimum human life cycle consists of five mushel stages: youth (12-24 years), two twelve-year phases of maturity (24-36 and 36-48 years), and old age (48-60 and beyond). The mushel endlessly repeats, but each completed cycle brings transformation. This extended duration of a single cycle reflects the perception of time shaped by long nomadic migrations. It fostered endurance, patience, and wisdom, and laid the foundation for a unique ecological ethic, a moral system, and a profound reverence for women as those through whom the continuity of the cycles is sustained for all living beings (Sadykova, 2019).

1.3 Interplay of dance and other traditional artistic practices

Along similar lines, the vibrancy of Kazakh dance is created through a comprehensive system of expressive means, which incorporates applied arts and music. Building on this perspective, Kulbekova (2008-c) describes Kazakh folk dance as a unifying thread that bridges diverse artistic traditions and draws parallels between dance movements and the ornamental designs found in craftsmanship produce.





Image courtesy: (1-5) Examples of the Kazakh traditional applied art pieces, including jewelry and household items, from the collection of the Kasteyev State Museum of Arts, taken by the author.

To fully grasp this connection, it is essential to introduce the Kazakh system of ornamentation. The flight of birds has served as a source of inspiration for humankind throughout history, and the nomadic Kazakh peoples are no exception. Imagine the sleek silhouette of a bird, captured in vibrant strokes across a wide color palette: its wings embodying both strength and delicacy as they traverse the vast sky. This very motif inspired the Kazakh zoomorphic ornament ‘Qus qanati’, which translates as “wing of a bird”. Ornaments applied to everyday objects and garments served as a primary medium of artistic expression, yet their integration into all facets of nomadic life was never solely about visual aesthetics. For instance, qus qanati was commonly used to convey wishes for a journey as joyful and liberating as flight itself, and it was often given as a gift to those preparing to embark on a journey (Basenov, 1957). Therefore, Kazakh ornamentation comprises patterns constructed from basic symbolic elements, each with a unique name and meaning. These elements combine into diverse motifs marked by compositional harmony, rhythmic balance, and nuanced color (Ayagan, 2004). Functioning as a tangible vessel for the people’s philosophy, ornamental patterns were meticulously embedded across numerous objects in the sphere of applied arts³, which, in turn, enabled ancestors in transmitting their world-comprehension, spiritual beliefs, and ethical principles to descendants (Basenov, 1957).



³ These motifs adorned household items made from textile, leather, bone, metal, and wood through felting, weaving, embroidery, and the crafting of women’s silver jewellery (Basenov, 1957).

Image courtesy: (1) Renowned 20th-century Kazakh dancer Shara Zhiyenkulova performing the “Qoşqar muyiz’ dance element, from the ‘Altynqor’ digital portal.

(2-3) ‘Qoşqar muyiz’ ornament, from the ‘Kazakh Ornaments’ book by Kozhabayev;

(4) Renowned Kazakh dancer, choreographer, academician Anavara Sadykova performing the “Qoşqar muyiz’ dance element, screenshot from the ‘NEXT’ short film.

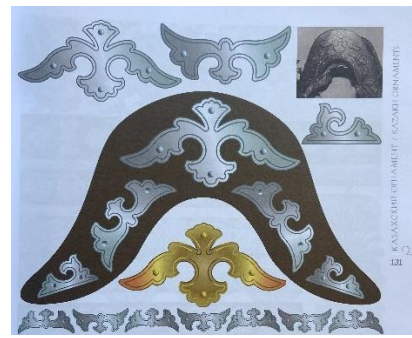
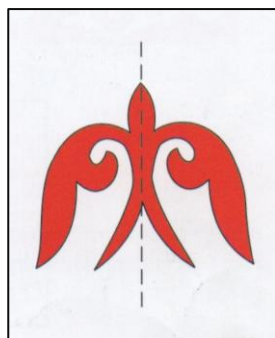


Image courtesy: (1) Version of the ‘Qus qanaty’ ornament, from the archives of the National Library, Almaty.

(2) Renowned 20th-century Kazakh dancer Shara Zhiyenkulova performing the ‘Qus qanaty’ dance element, from the ‘Altynqor’ digital portal.

(3) ‘Qus qanaty’ ornament, from the ‘Kazakh Ornaments’ book by Kozhabayev.

In continuation, reflecting the zoomorphic motifs fundamental to Kazakh ornamentation, movements such as eponymous ‘qus qanaty’ or, for example, ‘qoshqar müiiz’, serve as mimetic gestures and iconic postures within Kazakh folk dance (Sadykova, 2019). These choreographic elements reinforce the important connection between the physicality of dance and the broader artistic and symbolic lexicon of Kazakh cultural heritage, which layers its visual, performative, and spiritual dimensions. Another, significant motif, touched upon above, is the closed circle, most notably exemplified in the shanyrak, it represents the inseparable bond between humanity and the cosmos (Basenov, 1957; Kenzhebaykyzy, 2024). This uninterrupted line was believed to ward off evil and provide protection, a symbolic resonance carried into the Kazakh dance move ‘Aynalma’ through circular movements that embody care and guardianship. This notion also inspired the affectionate Kazakh term ‘Aynalayn’, meaning “I circle around you, protecting you”, used to address loved ones (Moldakhmetova, 2015, p. 280).



Image courtesy: Round shanyrak (a part of yurt), from the website of the Assembly.



Image courtesy: (1-2) Dombyra (left) and qobyz (right), photographed by the author at the Ykhlas Museum of Folk Musical Instruments.

(3) Musician Guldana Nurabayeva performing on jetigen, from Marzhan Äbish's online article in Egemen Qazaqstan.

Music is an integral part of Kazakh folk dance, as the two have traditionally been regarded as inseparable forms of artistic expression (Kulbekova, 2008-c). Sadykova (2019) first highlights various traditional singer-storytellers such as akyns⁴ and zhyrau⁵, who played a key role in shaping the literary culture of the Kazakh people by narrating, through oral poetic forms, the processes occurring within and around society.

Furthermore, Kulbekova (2008-b) emphasizes that traditional Kazakh dances are strongly connected to kui, traditional instrumental compositions usually performed on the dombyra⁶, as well as other folk instruments such as the qobyz⁷ and jetigen⁸. These instruments establish the rhythmic and emotional foundation of the dance, which assists in conveying through melody the imagery of nature, emotions, and epic narratives. For instance, the renowned dombyra player Dina Nurpeisova performed dance kui, where the melody accentuated the dynamics and plasticity of movement. Such compositions were commonly used to accompany both group and solo dances at public celebrations and communal events.



Image courtesy: Musician Nurpeisova with her teacher Zhambyl Zhabayev, from the archives of the Zhambyl State Philharmonic

Consequently, certain dances are directly linked to musical traditions and ritualistic practices. The 'Baksi oyiny' (Shaman's Game) integrates ritualistic movements with the hypnotic sounds of the

⁴ Poet and singer, often an improviser, among the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia (Sadykova, 2019).

⁵ Similar to akyns, also poet and singer, with a difference that zhyrau were also important government officials (Sadykova, 2019).

⁶ Long-necked musical string instrument used by Turkic communities in Central Asian countries in their traditional folk music (Kazakhstan Tourist Information System, n.d.).

⁷ Turkic bowed string instrument. It has two strings made of horsehair (Kazakhstan Tourist Information System, n.d.).

⁸ Seven-stringed plucked instrument with a certain resemblance to gusli, guzheng or horizontal harp in shape (Kazakhstan Tourist Information System, n.d.).

qobyz, creating a meditative atmosphere. This dance reflects ancient shamanic practices, where music and movement were employed to induce altered states of consciousness.



Video courtesy: (1) Kazakh dance 'Jetigen', published by 'NOMAD' Choreography Academy [YouTube].
(2) Composition 'Ansau' by the 'Hassak' Ethno-Folk Group, published by the group's official channel [YouTube].

Kazakh folk dances were traditionally performed within family gatherings and public festivities, often accompanying aitys⁹, wedding ceremonies, and hunting and military rituals. One example is the 'Qyz quu' (Chasing the Girl) game, where young men and women engaged in equestrian competitions, with musical accompaniment enhancing the competitive spirit. Notably, returning to the shamanistic elements, dance movements not only depicted emotions and narratives but also carried magical significance: in pre-hunting ritual dances, performers would imitate the movements of hunters, archery gestures, and animal behavior to ensure a successful hunt (Kulbekova, 2008-b).

1.4 Evolving landscape of Kazakh folk dance



⁹ A traditional poetic genre in oral literature, characterized by improvised verbal duels performed before an audience. The two participants, known as akyns, typically sit close to each other, playing the dombyra while singing rhymed improvisational verses (Baigulakova, 2021).

Video courtesy: (1) Shara Zhiyenkulova's dance, from the Altynqor digital archive [VIDEO available, please click the image or use the [link](#) to access].

(2) Choreography in the style of Kazakh folk dance by Janel Ulanova, performed by Madina Sadubaeva to the composition 'Keshikpey kelem dep-en' by Shamshi Kaldayakov, from the personal Instagram page of Janel Ulanova [VIDEO available, please click the image or use the [link](#) to access].

In the evolution of Kazakh folk dance, it initially developed as a form of free improvisation, allowing dancers to express emotions and tell stories through distinct styles. However, as folk traditions were passed down orally and through performance, there was always a risk of losing certain elements. This made the 1930s a crucial period for the preservation of Kazakh dance, as it marked the emergence of staged folk dance performances. Pioneering choreographers such as Shara Zhiyenkulova and Dauren Abirov dedicated countless hours to sketching the movements of traditional performers. Yet, beyond the physical gestures, they also recognized the importance of storytelling within dance. Through their efforts, folk dance elements were systematized into a structured vocabulary, which later served as the foundation for staged dance productions (Nurgaliyevna¹⁰, in an interview with Gaponova, 2019).

At the present stage, institutional and academic development of Kazakh dance is carried out through several key educational institutions, including the Almaty Choreographic School named after Seleznev, the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after Zhurgenov in Almaty, and the Kazakh National Academy of Choreography in Astana. Regardless of a student's specialization – whether in choreography, production, or classical ballet – Kazakh folk dance is a mandatory component of the curriculum. Faculty and students at these institutions are also actively engaged in research and the integration of Kazakh dance into various performances, including concerts and competitions at both national and international levels. Across Kazakhstan, numerous dance ensembles maintain broad repertoires that incorporate Kazakh dance. One such ensemble is 'Gulder', directed by Anvara Sadykova, a student of Shara Zhiyenkulova, who continues to play a significant role in the study, development, and promotion of the Kazakh folk dance art (Kenzhetaeva, 2021; Press Service of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). In addition, dance theatre-laboratories such as 'Jolda', led by Zhanna Tulendy, explore the integration of various elements of Kazakh culture into interactive stage productions, which creates fertile ground for experimentation and reimagining tradition (Timofeeva, 2022).

Kazakhstani researchers Zhumasseitova and Shomaeva (2021), in their work 'The history of decolonial sensitivity in the discourse of choreographic art in Kazakhstan', describe the current state

¹⁰ Rector of the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. Zhurgenov, Kazakh music educator, Honored Worker of Kazakhstan (Kazakh National Academy of Choreography, n.d.).

of Kazakh dance as a form of “neo-Kazakh choreography”. This approach blends traditional Kazakh dance, serving as the foundation, with elements of classical and contemporary choreography. Anvara Sadykova is cited as one of the key pioneers of this direction, alongside other influential figures in the world of Kazakh dance, such as Aigul Tati, Gulnara Adamova and Mukaram Avakhri. The researchers further highlight positive shifts, noting that more choreographers are seeking to deconstruct and reinterpret traditional images, thereby liberating them from colonial and Soviet aesthetics. Folk dance, in this context, is increasingly recognized as a powerful medium for cultural self-determination and the affirmation of national identity.

Overall, the contemporary dance scene in Kazakhstan is marked by openness to innovation, as reflected in the diversity of artistic expressions that are gaining public attention. An intriguing example is found in three different interpretations of the folk dance ‘Aqqu’, which means “Swan” in Kazakh, performed to the famous kui by Kazakh musician Nurgisa Tlendiyev. The first, a modern interpretation, is performed by Zarina Toleulova; the second, a traditional version staged by Anvara Sadykova, is performed by Akqanat Smagulova; and the third is a choreographic rendition set to Camille Saint-Saëns’ ‘The Swan’, arranged for the Kazakh instrument qobyz by Maqsat Medeubek, with dancer Akerke Batyrbek incorporating elements of Kazakh dance.



Video courtesy: (1) Zarina Toleulova’s viral contemporary interpretation of ‘Aqqu’ at Almaty Dance Fest 2023, which garnered nearly half a million views, from the artist’s personal Instagram page [VIDEO available, please click the image or use the [link](#) to access].

(2) Traditional version of ‘Aqqu’ folk dance, choreographed by Anvara Sadykova and performed by Akqanat Smagulova, from the official YouTube channel of the Kazakh National Academy of Choreography [VIDEO YouTube].

(3) Akerke Batyrbek performing a dance incorporating elements of Kazakh choreography to Camille Saint-Saëns’ ‘The Swan’, arranged for the traditional Kazakh instrument qobyz by Maqsat Medeubek, from his official YouTube channel [VIDEO YouTube].

The author believes that, given the developmental journey of Kazakh dance, the study by Iacono and Brown (2016) is of particular interest. The authors argue that, in the context of dance as cultural heritage, the binary division between tangible and intangible does not reflect the multidimensional

nature of this art form. Dance simultaneously encompasses embodied actions, emotional responses, cultural codes, material objects, and social structures. Within a more holistic framework, namely, that of living cultural heritage, dance emerges not merely as a vessel of tradition but as a space where temporal, personal, and social dimensions converge in a unified experience.

Iacono and Brown propose several theoretical perspectives to approach dance in this way. Following Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenology, dance is understood as a means of self-exploration and bodily awareness, which includes a sense of embeddedness within one's cultural environment. Through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, dance is also framed as a process through which the performer simultaneously reproduces and reinterprets traditional forms in response to societal and personal change. This makes dance an effective mechanism for both cultural adaptation and heritage sustainability. Thus, the author further explores this multidimensionality of dance in the following section.

2. Literature review

2.1 Embodiment

The concept of embodiment was first introduced to the author in the context of tourism, where it refers to the active physical participation of tourists in the culture of their destination. Unlike passive observation, embodiment in tourism involves tourists and non-human elements (such as local communities and the natural environment) in the co-creation and consumption of experiences. This engagement unfolds through the body in a multisensory manner, such as touch or movement, and has been discussed by various authors, including Rakic and Chambers (2012) and Veijola and Jokinen (1994). Expanding this, Lundh and Foster (2024) discuss embodiment as a fundamental element in the sculpting self-identity and supporting mental health. They define embodiment as a synthesis of the dichotomy "having a body" (the object's perspective) and "being a body" (the subject's perspective). It is this duality that constitutes the basis of self-awareness in integrating physical and emotional perceptions of the body into a cohesive experience. Drawing on phenomenological approaches from, for instance, Merleau-Ponty (1945), and others, Lundh and Foster focus on the particularity of the human body as object of perception and subject of experience: the "objective" aspect provides stability and recognizability, while the "subjective" aspect shapes a sense of vitality and selfhood. In turn, harmonious embodiment, characterized by a balance of both aspects, fosters wellness and resilience and can be supported by practical strategies, including yoga and body-oriented therapies.

2.2 Dance as an embodied cultural practice

To further proceed, Block and Kissell (2001) consider dance as a unique medium of understanding embodiment and its role in shaping human experience. The authors underline that dance unites not only the body and mind but also places the body as an active subject interacting with the world, which, in turn, contributes to recognition of the body as an integral part of the self. In this vein, a deeper self-awareness fosters connections with others. For such an ontological representation of the human existence through inter-relationship among physical, cultural, symbolic, and social aspects across space, time, and community, dance becomes integral, thereby explaining its presence in social cohesion, healing, and rituals across myriads of cultures. Additionally, while Ness (2004) focuses on the study of dance as an embodied cultural practice and the analysis of corporeality in the context of cultural experience, she claims that dance is not only a form of movement, but an embodiment of social, historical, and cultural values expressed through the body. Her work also indicated a methodological shift from external observations toward participatory approaches by placing the researcher within the practice of the dances. Such an embodied perspective allows an advanced understanding of the interrelationship between movement and cultural context, since bodily participation can reveal cultural meanings from within. Ness criticizes the phenomenological analysis for not being able to fully capture the complexity of dance and advocates for an integral approach that considers the multifaceted dimensions of the origin and developmental journey of various dance practices. In fact, by situating the body as both a bearer and expression of culture, Ness's work redefines dance as a dynamic process, which offers a richer framework for cultural analysis through embodied practice, paramount to the transmission of values of one's nation.

In 'Dance, authenticity, and cultural memory: the politics of embodiment', Buckland (2001) examines how dance, using the example of the Horn Dance of Abbots Bromley, serves as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural memory while navigating the balance between continuity and adaptation. She further emphasizes the importance of live interaction and embodied learning, arguing that physical transmission of knowledge is crucial for preserving the complexity and authenticity of dance traditions. In addition, she identifies traditional dance as a form of cultural capital, that enhances community prestige, attracts tourism, and contributes to global representation and economic growth. Similarly, Romaguera (2018) positions dance as a living, intermediary archive through which historical and cultural narratives are preserved and conveyed. The author critiques linear and fixed perceptions of history often inherent in conventional archives, which tend to exclude marginalized voices. Using rumba as a case study, Romaguera has shown how dance goes beyond aesthetic concerns to become a form of resistance, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In fact, the

rumba and similar practices challenge traditional notions of historiography by providing counter-narratives and creating spaces for inclusive storytelling.

2.3 Therapeutic benefits of dance

Beyond its role in preserving culture, dance offers substantial therapeutic and psychological benefits. Schwender et al. (2018), through participant interviews, identify six key themes (self-expression, flow states, and the role of music among them) that highlight dance's potential to enhance body awareness, reduce stress, and promote emotional healing. Furthermore, dance is noted as a way to combat loneliness, strengthen social connections, and support mental health. In a comparable manner, Braun and Kotera (2022) critically review 24 studies on dance interventions and their effects on self-perception, with particular focus on self-esteem, body image, and confidence. The results indicate that dance greatly enhances self-expression and body awareness. Among children and adolescents, it improves body image and self-expression, while for adults, it fosters high levels of self-confidence and personal development.

2.3 Nomadism and urban context

Previously examined within the framework of historical development and cultural influence, the author seeks to further explore the concept of nomadism. Khazanov (2009) contends that nomadism lacks a universally accepted definition, with scholars differing in their interpretations: while some adopt a broad perspective, encompassing various mobile groups such as pastoralists, hunters, and gatherers, others define it more narrowly, restricting it to a pastoral economy characterized by a mobile way of life. Alzhan (2013) and Nysanbayev (2014) conceptualize nomadism within the context of Central Asian societies as a challenge to the subject-object dichotomy characteristic of Western thought. Instead, advocating for a holistic epistemological framework in which spiritual and ethical principles take precedence over rigid rationalism, it implies an inherent unity between humanity and the world, thereby fostering a balance between reason and emotion. Indzhigolyan (2010) further examines the impact of Western theoretical paradigms, particularly the nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari (2008), in reinterpreting the nomadic way of life in Kazakhstan. However, the study extends beyond Western theoretical constructs to incorporate the contributions of Kazakhstani scholars, including Masanov (1995), who views nomadism as a distinct yet interconnected civilizational model. Rather than existing in isolation, nomadism evolved through dynamic interactions with sedentary cultures while maintaining a strong emphasis on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of nomadic societies (Masanov, 1995).

A central focus of Indzhigolyan's study is the extent to which the nomadic way of life has shaped economic structures, social norms, customary practices, and ethnic self-awareness, ultimately contributing to the formation of identity. Moreover, attention is given to the role of Tengrianism, as well as the selective adaptation of various religious traditions by nomadic groups, a process that allowed for external influences without fundamentally altering their worldview. Despite its inherent adaptability and mobility, nomadic culture has demonstrated a remarkable degree of continuity by means of preserving and transmitting its heritage primarily through oral traditions. In the post-Soviet context, the conceptualization of nomadism has undergone significant transformation, shifting from a Soviet-era homogenized framework to a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of national history and cultural identity. Within this revised discourse, nomadism is examined not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a mode of existence, a cognitive framework, and a mechanism for self-identification.

A critical dimension of Indzhigolyan's research is the examination of the ideological instrumentalization of nomadism, particularly its deployment within political discourse to shape Kazakhstan's national identity. In the post-Soviet era, nomadism has not only been studied as part of the nation's cultural heritage but has also been actively incorporated into state policies aimed at reinforcing national cohesion. Thus, in contemporary Kazakhstan, nomadism assumes a multifaceted role: it functions as an object of scholarly inquiry, a central theme in national discourse, and a distinct philosophical lens through which the relationship between society and the world is understood. Within the scope of this master's thesis, this conceptual dimension of nomadism is regarded as fundamental.

In examining nomadism within a contemporary context, Terentyev's (2020) study offers a particularly insightful perspective on the paradox of urban identity among Mongolian nomads, with a specific focus on Ulaanbaatar. While the capital stands as a national symbol, it also functions as its own distinct cultural space, representing modernization in contrast to the steppe, which remains a stronghold of traditional nomadic values. Terentyev explores this duality in Mongolian identity, emphasizing the generational divide: older Mongols tend to romanticize nomadic traditions, while younger generations are increasingly drawn to city life. This shift creates tension between nomadism as a core part of national identity and the growing reality of urbanization. Yet, moving to the city does not mean completely leaving behind nomadic culture. Instead, it takes on new forms through transforming into a mental and cultural framework kept alive through symbolic practices. Terentyev ultimately suggests that for historically nomadic peoples, urban environments do not erase nomadism but reshape and redefine it.

Pain (2014) echoes this idea in his study ‘Nomadic traditions as capital for modernization: an anthropological and economic study based on the case of Kazakhstan’. He argues that Kazakhstan’s path to modernization should not involve discarding nomadic traditions but rather incorporating them into contemporary economic and political life. In his view, the strong kinship networks formed in nomadic societies are still vital today for mobility and adaptability – qualities that remain essential in a rapidly changing world. Abusharipov (2016), in turn, takes the discussion in another direction, as he focuses on how nomads relate to their natural environment. He emphasizes that nomadic societies never saw themselves as separate from nature but rather as part of it, taking only what was necessary to survive. In contrast, he critiques modern society’s growing disconnection from nature and the environmental destruction that has followed. He argues that reviving a nature-conscious way of life could help address not just ecological challenges but also deeper moral and ethical crises. In this vein, Danilina (2018) highlights nomadic urbanism as a means of increasing flexibility and multifunctionality, creating conditions conducive to the use of public spaces not only in the spatial but also in the temporal dimension. Thus, temporary urban solutions, such as pop-up spaces, efficiently utilize resources and enhance well-being through cultural and social engagement.

2.4 Cultural capital and mediation

Bourdieu (1993), as previously referenced, in his essays on the ‘Field of cultural production’, dives into the forces shaping cultural creation and offers a framework applicable to the study of its internal mechanisms. His concept of the field refers to a distinct social space in which individuals, institutions, and practices interact to establish norms and define cultural value. In this context, they engage in a form of mediation: not simply as a means of “spoon-feeding” information about tangible or intangible elements of culture to audience for effortless consumption, but as a broader, socially meaningful communicative process. This process involves fostering connections between people and cultural heritage, creating spaces for dialogue, emotional resonance, shared reflection, and, at times, re-interpretation of meanings (Caillet, 1994; Fleury, 2016). Such mediation can take a variety of forms depending on the characteristics of the heritage element and the intended goals, and a basic example would be museum tours. Extending this line of thought, as a tool for the democratization of culture and the inclusion of diverse social groups, mediation, when employed by public or community institutions, can contribute to the development of personal responsibility for heritage, encouraging its active, contemporary engagement and growth (Shalabayeva, 2001).

Offering a further inflection, individuals navigate the field based on their unique habitus, which is shaped by social origin, lived experiences, and inherited practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus acts as a guiding structure through which individuals reproduce and interpret cultural norms, tastes, and

traditions. These dispositions, perceptual frameworks, dynamically interact with different forms of capital. Of particular relevance to this study is cultural capital, which, according to Bourdieu (1993), encompasses intangible assets used to gain authority and influence, such as formal education, artistic knowledge, and associations with recognized institutions, which together contribute to cultural legitimacy and reputation.

In this context, institutions such as the private school ‘Open Ballet’ contribute to embedding cultural expressions into public consciousness by providing accessible avenues for participation. Extending this picture further, the growing commercialization of traditional cultural practices reflects a shifting demand for heritage-based creative industries, signaling new opportunities for the reintegration of traditional cultural forms into contemporary society. This trend, as previously discussed in relation to the evolving role of dance as a multidimensional heritage practice, underscores the need to move beyond static or binary frameworks. Rather than being confined to historical preservation or academic study, traditional artistic expressions are increasingly understood as living practices that are both economically viable and socially resonant. In this sense, the emergence of dance in consumer-facing cultural spaces does not diminish its heritage value but rather expands the ways in which it can function as a site of embodied knowledge, cultural continuity, and collective meaning-making in contemporary life.

3. Overview of the theoretical framework

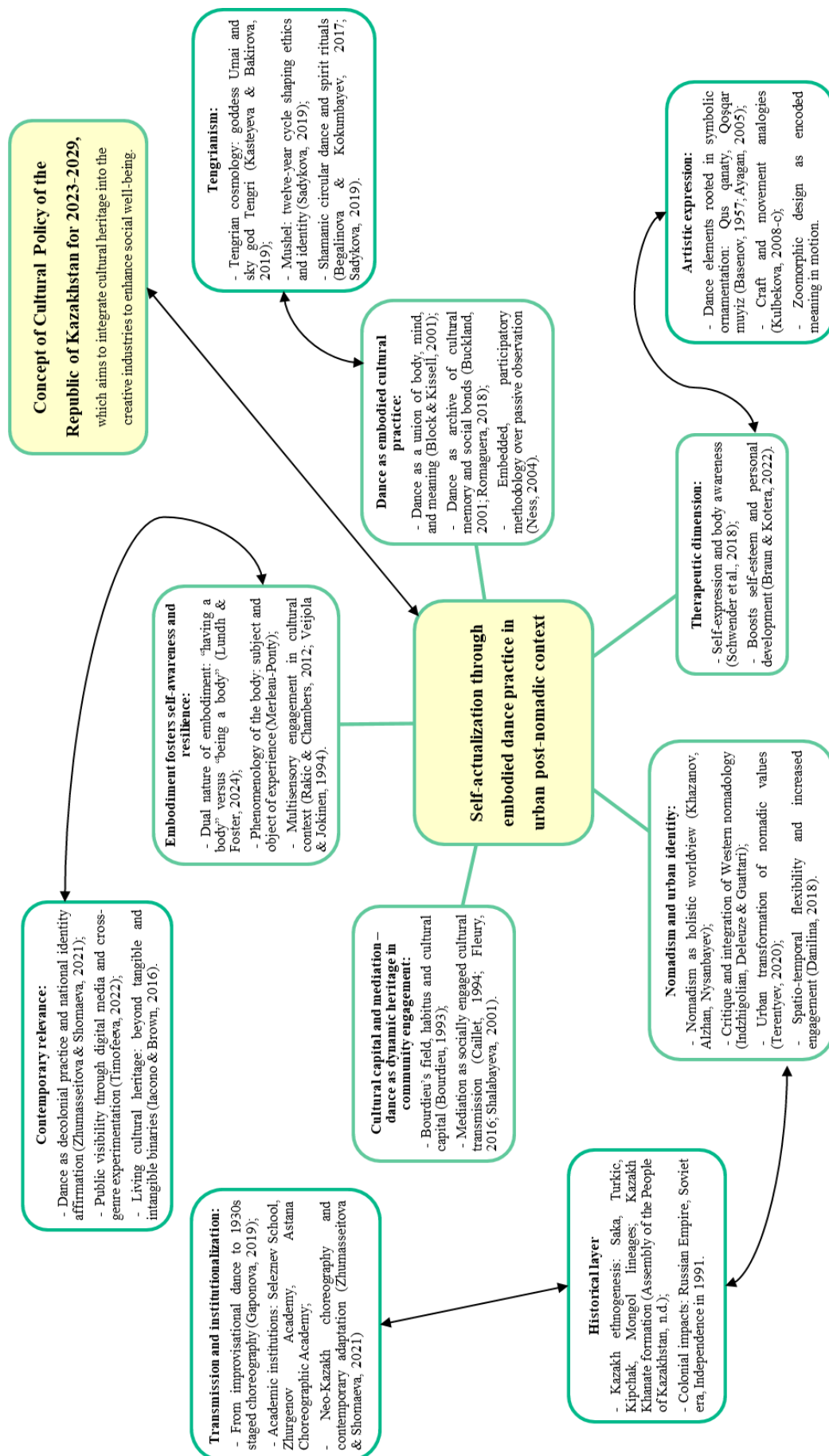


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

The contextual background presented in this study complements and substantiates the literature review by grounding abstract concepts such as embodiment, cultural transmission, and nomadism in the concrete sociocultural and historical realities of Kazakhstani society, as well as within the developmental trajectory of the folk dance. In turn, the literature review, drawing on both local and global approaches, encompasses and conceptually structures all the key elements. Together, these elements form a multilayered and coherent theoretical framework, visually represented in Figure 1, that supports a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under study and allows for a nuanced reflection on its contemporary implications.

Furthermore, based on the materials discussed, the dual role of dance is evident: as a repository of a nation's constantly evolving socio-cultural identity across time and space and as a therapeutic practice. Embodied experience is noted as particularly important: not simply as a way to learn, but as a pathway to truly internalize and connect with knowledge on a deeper level. Yet, despite its potential, there is currently a lack of direct evidence showing how Kazakh traditional dance impacts practitioners in today's world. Even more uncertain is whether folk dance helps practitioners form a spiritual connection to their nomadic ancestors, particularly in urban settings where the natural world is more of a distant backdrop than an active presence. To address these underexplored dimensions, this study seeks to gather and analyze primary data through qualitative inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research question

This research explores how the embodied practice of Kazakh folk dance fosters self-actualization by enabling individuals to reconnect with their intangible cultural heritage in contemporary urban settings. To investigate this, three sub-questions are considered: (1) How do specific dance elements promote self-actualization? (2) How does the physical practice of these elements cultivate a spiritual connection to ancestral nomadic heritage? (3) What role does the choreographer play as a storyteller in conveying meaning? The first sub-question explores how physical movement enables self-realization as a mode of individual articulation and inner growth. The second broadens the scope to cultural rediscovery, investigating how Kazakh folk dance, anchored in nomadic lifeways, awakens ancestral memory and fosters a sense of spiritual continuity. The third addresses the interpretive and educational layers of the practice by underscoring the choreographer's role in conveying cultural knowledge. By approaching dance as a narrative vehicle, the research conceptualizes it as an evolving, participatory heritage form.

2. Research design

A qualitative research approach was chosen for its capacity to offer the most nuanced way to study the subjective perception and interpretation of engagement in folk dance practice (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Sofaer, 1999). In fact, this methodological choice is largely justified by the multivalent nature of dance, as noted by Fraleigh and Hanstein (1998), which lies in its intersection with the body, as well as with visual, cultural, and other dimensions. The study employed an embedded case study design centered on the 'Open Ballet' dance school, which provided a structured yet adaptable framework for data collection and subsequent analysis. This research design fostered a deeper and more holistic comprehension of the unique dynamics within a specific educational environment as a bounded case, while also allowing for the integration of analytically significant sub-units, namely, individual participants outside the school (Budiyanto, Prananto and Tan 2019; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). It also supported the use of multiple qualitative methods aimed at reconstructing the substantive aspects, as well as the underlying mechanisms that shape participants' lived experience of the dance process (Bennett and Elman, 2006). To sum up, and in line with Yin's (2009) approach, this research design made it possible to generate meaningful insights from an in-depth exploration of a single case, while still capturing broader patterns and processes with potential applicability to other settings. In the case of an embedded design, the inclusion of additional sub-units within the same case

is both acceptable and methodologically appropriate, particularly when they offer complementary perspectives that enrich the understanding of the core case (Yin, 2003).

3. Data collection methods

Two primary methods were adopted for the study. The first was **participant observation**, in which the author actively participated in and observed Kazakh folk dance classes led by a professional choreographer. This immersive approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the embodied dimensions of Kazakh dance within the teacher-student context, including movements, symbolic meanings, and cultural narratives, while also offering in-depth understanding of class dynamics, bodily expressions, and non-verbal communication, all of which were essential for analyzing embodied cultural practices (Zahle, 2012). The second method employed **semi-structured interviews** with the choreographer and her students from the ‘Open Ballet’ studio, as well as with additional individual participants outside the school. These interviews provided a more intimate perspective on the personal and collective impact of the practice, delving into the participants’ stories, experiences, and reflections on the cultural and therapeutic dimensions of Kazakh folk dance (Bryman, 2016). Semi-structured interviews, in fact, created a dialogical space for reflection: first, by enabling participants to distance themselves from the emotional and physical routine of the practice and consider it from an external perspective; and second, by allowing them to articulate their perspectives in terms that best reflected their lived experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021).

As mentioned above, while the majority of participants are affiliated with the ‘Open Ballet’ studio (8 out of 12), the sample was intentionally broadened to include not only leisure practitioners but also two more professional choreographers and academic researchers. This categorization allowed for a more sophisticated framework for analysis: amateur practitioners offered insight into personal fulfillment and cultural rediscovery; choreographers emphasize storytelling and pedagogy; and researchers contribute historical and theoretical context. However, it was crucial to recognize that each participant’s experience varied significantly, sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging, which reminded the author not to over-rely on rigid classifications when interpreting the data.

Overall, as Bryman (2016) suggests, participant observation and semi-structured interviews were selected because they foster a setting conducive to discovery, unconstrained by predefined conceptual frameworks, and offering a high degree of receptivity and adaptability. This mixed-method approach, in fact, combined the structure of preformulated questions with the flexibility of open conversation, while also making space for those aspects that words alone may not fully convey, captured instead through the researcher’s physical presence within the practice. Furthermore, observation strengthened the reliability of the analysis through a form of practical fact-checking: by

comparing what was said in interviews with what was observed in situ, the author identified both consistencies and discrepancies between the reflective and everyday levels of experience (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021).

4. Sample and units of analysis

From a practical standpoint, within the scope of this study, the author attended six 90-minute Kazakh folk dance classes at the ‘Open Ballet’ school. Personal participation in the classes was key to securing contacts with other students and the choreographer for further interviews. In this regard, the semi-structured interview guide ([see Appendix 1.1](#) – in Russian; [1.2](#) – English version) was developed to structure the dialogue with participants and to ensure the interviews remained focused on the core research questions: it helped define thematic boundaries and maintain coherence across conversations while allowing space for individual insights. The questions were tailored to three categories of respondents: amateur dancers, professional choreographers, and academic researchers. This approach provided a multi-layered perspective on the topic, from personal experience to pedagogical and analytical reflections. All interviews were conducted using this guide, designed by the author. In total, twelve interviews were conducted – one in person and eleven via Zoom. More specifically:

- Seven interviews were conducted with amateur practitioners from the ‘Open Ballet’ school, ranging in age from 17 to 43. Their professional backgrounds were unrelated to dance and varied from geophysics to marketing; the same diversity applied to their ethnic backgrounds;
- Three interviews were conducted with professional dancers (graduates of the Seleznev Choreographic School), now working as choreographers and performers;
- Two interviews were held with academic researchers (professors) who also work as choreographers;

It is important to note that personal data such as ethnic background, age, and gender are disclosed in accordance with the permissions obtained from the participants. Further details on each participant are provided in the table below.

Table 1. Overview of interview participants and their backgrounds

No.	Anonymized interview participants	Nature of involvement in Kazakh dance	Ethnic background	Age	Gender	Conduction Date	Interviewee Duration

1	Interviewee 1	Professional dancer, choreographer	Kazakh	26	Female	12.03.2025	1 hour 36 minutes 9 seconds
2	Interviewee 2	Amateur practitioner	Kazakh	17	Female	31.03.2025	47 minutes 56 seconds
3	Interviewee 3	Amateur practitioner	Russian and Assyrian	25	Female	01.04.2025	55 minutes 17 seconds
4	Interviewee 4	Amateur practitioner	Kazakh	36	Female	03.04.2025	53 minutes 50 seconds
5	Interviewee 5	Professional dancer, choreographer	Kazakh, Tatar, Mari, Bashkir and Russian	33	Female	05.04.2025	1 hour 4 minutes 48 seconds
6	Interviewee 6	Amateur practitioner	Kazakh	41	Female	08.04.2025	1 hour 18 minutes 7 seconds
7	Interviewee 7	Amateur practitioner	Kazakh	43	Female	10.04.2025	41 minutes 14 seconds
8	Interviewee 8	Amateur practitioner	Russian	36	Female	16.04.2025	46 minutes 43 seconds
9	Interviewee 9	Professional dancer	Kazakh	22	Female	29.04.2025	39 minutes 22 seconds
10	Interviewee 10	Academic researcher, choreographer	Kazakh	39	Female	02.05.2024	57 minutes 45 seconds
11	Interviewee 11	Amateur practitioner	Russian and Estonian	25	Male	09.05.2025	1 hour 11 minutes
12	Interviewee 12	Academic researcher, choreographer	Kazakh	43	Female	12.05.2025	59 minutes 16 seconds

Also, the interviews were conducted in a mix of Russian and Kazakh, depending on which language participants found most comfortable for expressing their thoughts in the moment. Transcripts were coded in the original language, while codes were developed in Kazakh, Russian, or

English, depending on context. The translation was primarily carried out by the author herself, with occasional support from applications such as Reverso Context for ensuring contextually accurate terminology, and tools like Quillbot and ChatGPT for minor phrasing adjustments and synonym suggestions. It is important to note that the author is a qualified English translator, holding an honors diploma in technical and professional education with a specialization in ‘Translation studies’ (Kazakh/Russian to English and vice versa). This substantial theoretical and practical background played a key role in managing the multilingual nature of the research and ensuring linguistic accuracy throughout the thesis.

The interview transcripts are stored in the author’s personal research archive. In accordance with Erasmus University Rotterdam requirements, they have also been made available to the thesis supervisor and second reader via TMS.

5. Specific methods of analysis

To avoid the fragmentation and loss of narrative flow often associated with traditional coding methods (Bryman, 2016), this study used **narrative analysis** as the primary approach for examining data. Narrative analysis focused on understanding how participants make sense of their embodied experiences with Kazakh folk dance, while still keeping their stories within the broader context of their lives, as continuous processes. By preserving the natural flow of their personal reflections and emotions, this approach ensured that the meaning, richness and cohesiveness of their narratives were not lost.

To suit the two main research methods, the study adapted different models of narrative analysis. More specifically, drawing on Bamberg’s (2012) approach, the author integrated two key levels of narrative analysis and applied them accordingly to participant observations to observe the “told through bodies” stories: the structural and the interactional-performative levels. Firstly, Bamberg builds on Riessman’s (2008) structural approach, which Bryman (2016, p. 318) defines as “the way a story is told”. This is best understood through Labov’s (1972) narrative elements, which function as a mechanism for analyzing a story as a cohesive cognitive structure – one that constructs internal event logic and creates a sense of engagement and closure. The key narrative units include orientation, which immerses the listener in context; complication, which introduces a disruption; followed by resolution, and finally, the coda, which returns the listener to the present moment. The second level is the interactional-performative analysis: here, narrative is treated as a form of social action through which relationships between storyteller and listener are dynamically shaped, as a result positions are negotiated, and, eventually, identities influenced. Overall, structuring participant observation through a narrative lens allowed the author to capture (a) the processual nature of embodied practice, but also

(b) its personal and social significance for participants, as it reflected the dynamics of learning, emotional experience, adaptation, and self-actualizing through movement.

For interviews, **thematic analysis** was used to identify recurring patterns and themes within the transcripts, offering insights into both shared and individual experiences. This method also enabled the narratives to be organized around repeated yet deeply personal themes (Bryman, 2016). The detailed codebook is provided in [Appendix 3](#): it includes a table with eight identified themes, along with examples of codes and their meanings, which illustrate how each theme was derived from the data.

Participant observations were conducted first to develop a situated understanding of the class's flow and atmosphere. Additionally, the author's active participation helped in facilitating smoother communication with participants and foster a more comfortable, trusting environment for subsequent interviews.

It is also important to note that by reconstructing the historical development of Kazakh dance art up to its contemporary form in the theoretical part, this study provided a foundation for understanding the general context in which modern interpretations emerge. This, in turn, enabled an analysis of the evolving trajectory of both physical and emotional connotations of Kazakh folk dance.

6. Operationalization and reflections

Following the completion of fieldwork, the operationalization of the three core analytical dimensions, encompassing self-actualization, spirituality, and cultural continuity, was validated and further refined through empirical findings, as elaborated in the subsequent chapter.

Firstly, self-actualization was explored through participants' physical and cognitive engagement with movement during dance sessions, alongside interview narratives in which they described experiences of emotional release, personal growth, and a renewed sense of connection to themselves through the embodied practice. Secondly, spirituality, understood as a culturally embedded phenomenon, emerged through recurring symbolic gestures and choreographic elements rooted in Kazakh folk traditions. Participant observation captured ritualized and imitative movements, particularly circular and wave-like motions, while interviews revealed that participants often associated these movements with a sense of ancestral presence and inner balance. Notably, this embodied experience of spirituality was often described not in abstract or transcendent terms, but rather as a grounded, everyday awareness – a capacity to be fully present in the “here and now”, which resonated with the day-to-day origins of many traditional dance gestures. Thirdly, cultural continuity was reflected in participants' conceptualization of dance as a living tradition: vital, adaptive, and closely interwoven with their personal and collective identity. Interview data suggested

that many participants viewed their involvement in dance as a means of activating, reinterpreting, and releasing inherited worldviews and ancestral knowledge back into the world. This was often situated within broader conversations around cultural revival, particularly in relation to language revitalization and ornamental heritage.

Together, these findings confirm the analytical value of the selected categories in capturing the multidimensional significance of Kazakh folk dance within contemporary urban contexts.

7. Limitations of the research methods

Firstly, while this study focused on a single embedded case and integrated insights from participants beyond the core research setting, its findings are not meant to be universally generalizable across all cultural heritage contexts. Given the context-dependent nature of case study research, the conclusions drawn are specific to the social and cultural environment in which the study was conducted. As Bryman (2016) points out, the strength of case studies lies not in their statistical representativeness but in their ability to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its situated framework. Moreover, the author acknowledges that attending only six folk dance sessions may not offer full immersion in the practice, and this limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the observational data.

Secondly, due to the interpretative nature of qualitative research, the author's active participation in the dance classes may have shaped the research process, introducing potential subjectivities in both observation and interpretation of interview data. To address this, the study triangulated findings through the inclusion of secondary sources (literature, visual materials), as well as interviews with professional Kazakh dance instructors and academic researchers. This approach strengthened the overall reliability and analytical depth of the study by offering multiple, intersecting perspectives.

Thus, the expansion of the interviewee pool served a dual purpose: to enrich the diversity of perspectives and to enhance the credibility of the findings through broader contextualization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Field observations at the ‘Open Ballet’ dance studio

‘Open Ballet’, the dance studio where Kazakh folk dance classes are held, is located in central Almaty at the intersection of Shevchenko and Baitursynov streets. While perceptions of convenience vary depending on a person’s location, this area forms part of the so-called “Golden Square,” considered one of the most central and vibrant parts of the city. The studio is well connected by public transport, including buses and the metro, and is situated near the popular pedestrian Arbat Street, known for its lively atmosphere with street musicians, terrace cafes, a cinema, various shops, and the historic Old Square, which regularly hosts city-wide cultural events (Batskikh and Mukitanova, 2020; Ondiris and Sarachakova, 2025).

The studio itself is tucked away inside a courtyard and includes a reception area, a changing room, two dance studios, showers, and restrooms. Prior to attending classes in person, the author explored the studio’s Instagram profile. This social media channel functions as the main platform for external communication, where the studio shares updates, schedules, and a variety of visual content from classes, as well as educational posts on topics such as dancewear and the history of various dance styles. For direct and personalized communication, ‘Open Ballet’ uses WhatsApp, which is linked from its Instagram page. The studio is also listed on Google Maps and the local navigation platform 2GIS, which ensures accessibility for individuals who do not use social media.

Upon entering the studio, visitors are greeted by the receptionist. Since all classes require advance registration, attendees must check in by presenting either a membership or a one-time payment. Hair ties are available free of charge at the reception desk, and items such as ballet slippers and protein bars can be purchased. Visitors are required to remove their shoes upon arrival.



Image courtesy: (1) Some decorative elements of the studio, namely a PVC message board, photograph by the author.
(2) Changing area of the studio, photograph by the ‘Open Ballet’ studio.

The next room is the changing area, where participants can leave their outerwear and fully change. The room includes a small table with a water cooler offering both hot and cold water, along with coffee and tea. A humorous calendar sits on the table. Of particular note is a small PVC message board decorated with warm-toned fairy lights, featuring photographs of students, motivational quotes, and handwritten notes and wishes. Pens and paper are provided so that anyone may contribute their own message to the board.

Most classes take place in the main dance studio, which is spacious and equipped with mirrors along the perimeter, a barre, and sound equipment. An electric piano is also available, mainly used during children’s ballet classes. Since only one hall is in regular use, the limited space helps avoid overcrowding and contributes to a calm, informal, yet lively and welcoming atmosphere. Alongside the music, one can often hear conversations and laughter, creating an uplifting and communal environment. Kazakh folk dance classes are held twice a week: on Wednesdays at 7:30 PM and on Sundays at 11:00 AM. Each session lasts 1.5 hours and is led by the professional choreographer. The author attended a total of six classes, with group sizes typically ranging from three to five participants. The group was predominantly composed of women of different ages, including both experienced dancers and newcomers.



Image courtesy: (1) Dance studio during the practice, photograph by the author¹¹.

¹¹ Verbal permission to take photographs and use them for research purposes was obtained during participation in the classes.

2. Participant observation of Kazakh folk dance classes at the ‘Open Ballet’ dance studio

Through participation in Kazakh folk dance classes, the author explores bodily practice as a form of embodied narrative structure. Following Bamberg’s three-level narrative model, discussed earlier, dance is conceptualized as a communicative act unfolding through movement, gesture, spatial dynamics, and interaction. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from purely verbal narration to the structure of the class itself: the music, choreography, the choreographer’s commentary, spatial organization, and both verbal and non-verbal exchanges. In this way, the author accesses stories told not only through words, but through the body. Importantly, the researcher’s role fluctuated between that of an external observer and an engaged participant, enabling a diversified perspective that includes both observed dynamics and the researcher’s own cognitive and somatic involvement.

Each session was organized as a self-contained narrative with a clearly traceable structure. The opening phase (orientation) included a series of warm-up and stretching exercises. While seemingly standard and aimed at injury prevention, two aspects proved particularly meaningful. First, careful attention was given to music selection. The warm-up tracks ranged from contemporary Kazakh compositions to modern reinterpretations of traditional melodies – sometimes performed on cello, sometimes featuring traditional instruments like *dombra* and *kobyz*. These musical choices helped create a meditative atmosphere and framed the beginning of each class as a threshold between the external world and the inner space of dance. The class would begin with basic exercises, such as neck rotations, shoulder rolls, but with each movement, cognitive engagement was also activated. The choreographer used a calm tone to explain not only how the movement should be done, but also why. A central anchoring concept of this stage was responsibility. As she explained to the students:

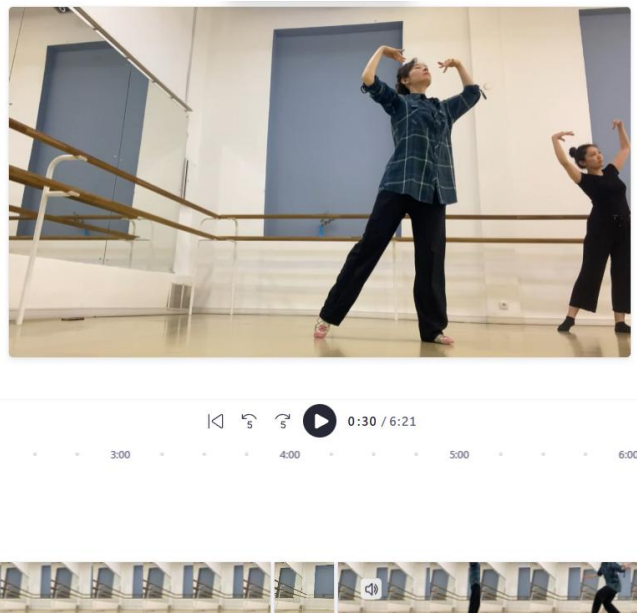
“Simply become aware of what you already have: what strength lives in your body, how much flexibility, what experience. That’s what you work with – not an ideal in your mind or a future version of yourself, but yourself here and now. You are responsible for the version of yourself you brought into the studio today. Don’t try to control more than what is available in this moment.”

One exercise, for instance, involved slowly “submerging” one foot into an imaginary sea, then letting the rest of the body follow the motion of a wave. The physical action of following this imagined flow expressed the same message: the goal is not to make a wide and impressive gesture at the expense of balance, but to commit fully, even to a small step. These bodily metaphors encouraged mindfulness, thereby grounding participants in the present.

In addition to familiar warm-up routines, some exercises included playful elements. In one session, participants were asked to move across the room like a member of the feline family by means of shifting their weight between arms and legs. Such tasks often led to smiles, laughter, and moments

of self-reflection: participants catching their own expression in the mirror. Another core exercise involved swaying from side to side in response to an inner impulse called ‘ruh¹²’, imagined as residing in the center of the chest. The goal was to let the body relax without losing control. Moreover, particular attention was given to hand and wrist articulation.

Following the warm-up, the class transitioned into learning choreography based on contemporary dance, infused with Kazakh elements. The choreographer demonstrated individual movements, which were gradually connected into longer sequences. As participants rehearsed these sequences to music, moments of hesitation, forgotten steps, and broken rhythm emerged. The narrative flow slowed down. Yet with each repetition, movements began to acquire definition; meaning was conveyed through emotion as well as technique.



Video courtesy: (1-2) Study and practice of choreography set to the music of the ‘Hassak’ ethno-folk group [VIDEOS available, please click the images or use the [link-1](#) and [link-2](#) to access].

While each gesture had conceptual weight, for instance, tolqyma, a wave-like movement imitating water, the key emphasis was on niet¹³: the emotional or experiential meaning that each dancer brings to the movement. In this way, an interpretive field emerged: where a single choreography was embodied differently by each individual, shaped by their internal narrative. The body became not an object of technical discipline but a subject of personal experience. This phase often triggered the strongest emotional responses, ranging from fear of making mistakes to full

¹² Spirit, inner world of a person (Koyanbaeva and Zaurbekova, 2011).

¹³ Inner intention, motivation, calling – an important notion in the Kazakh culture (Borbasova and Aljanova, 2015).

immersion. Gradually, bodily understanding took hold, and patterns were memorized, rhythm aligned, confidence emerged. Only once the sequence was well-integrated did the choreographer reveal the full story or emotional arc behind the choreography. This pedagogical choice preserved participants' subjective interpretations and prevented pre-defined meanings from limiting creativity. Exceptions occurred only when the music had an explicit narrative, which did not happen during the lessons that the author took but was explained in the interview portion.

Classes typically concluded with individual and group performances – first solo, then in pairs or small groups, which helped to reinforce learning. Video recordings proved particularly valuable. Since the author was herself engaged in the process, it was not always evident in the moment how others embodied the dance. Watching the videos later revealed something striking: though each dancer performed the same sequence, the *ruh* of each interpretation remained uniquely present.



Video courtesy: Study and practice of choreography set to the ‘Ruh Therapy’ by Bagjan Oktyabr [VIDEO available, please click the image or use the [link](#) to access].

To establish connections between class observations and interview data, the fieldnotes were thematically coded to identify recurrent motifs. Thus, the class was approached (a) as a physical discipline, and (b) as a form of storytelling through which cognitive themes, such as self-perception, cultural memory, and embodied identity, were enacted. Crucially, these themes were not always articulated verbally, were rather felt and spatialized. Each dance episode became a conceptual frame through which participants could explore their relation to emotional and physical environments: animal-inspired gestures evoked unity with nature, whereas historical motifs brought connection to cultural memory. One of the most consistent themes was a return to bodily awareness in the “here and now”, through which a dialogue with space was established. In this vein, at the interactional-

performative level, the choreographer functioned not simply as an instructor but as a storyteller. She “narrated” through her body, inviting others into the story. Participants responded: sometimes by replicating movements, sometimes by transforming them, sometimes in silence, and sometimes in verbal dialogue.

3. Interview analysis

The observations gathered during participant sessions are complemented by the results of semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis was applied to these interviews, enabling the identification of stable meaning-making structures through which participants reflect upon and interpret their experience of Kazakh folk dance. This approach proved particularly appropriate, as the interviews were rich in personal memories, bodily sensations, reflections on identity, and accounts of inner transformation.

Importantly, the interviews addressed not only themes directly related to participation in the studio but also broader questions concerning the cultural, emotional, and personal significance of dance beyond the immediate context of instruction. Accordingly, the interview analysis is organized around eight thematic categories, each explored through the diverse perspectives of the interviewees, depending on their roles and degrees of engagement in Kazakh dance practice, including amateur participants, choreographers, and researchers.

3.1 Identity and self-expression

“The theme of identity...of identification – is, in fact, closely tied to the idea of personal growth. In order for a person to begin moving upward, to grow like a tree, it is essential to recognize and feel their own roots.”

Interviewee 10

One of the central themes emerging from the interviews was that of self-unfolding through the active practice of Kazakh folk dance.

Several amateur practitioners from ‘Open Ballet’ noted that dance, whether ballroom, folk, or otherwise, had been a part of their lives since childhood. Their return to it in adulthood did not stem from a specific goal or expectations, but rather from an intuitive pull toward something both culturally rooted and physically engaging. As they continued their practice, participants began to realize that this initial impulse reached deeper into their sense of self, their origins, and a search for integrity.

To begin with, the practice of Kazakh dance art emerged as a deeply intimate tool for self-discovery, which offered an alternative space outside the fragmentation of everyday life. In this space,

participants could reconnect with a more coherent, integrated image of the self. As one participant, who is ethnically non-Kazakh but was born and raised in Kazakhstan, explained:

“It’s something I internally need... As if it’s a way to identify myself beyond routine work.”

Interviewee 3

In this sense, the dance studio functions as a kind of third space¹⁴, where the practitioner temporarily sheds social roles and becomes more open to the cultural codes embodied in the dance. It allowed for a feeling of belonging to a culture they respected, felt connected to, and wished to help preserve:

“Kazakh dance is closer to me than others, not because it’s objectively better, but because it’s mine. It feels absorbed from childhood. And although I’m not Kazakh, I was born and raised here. This is my homeland. This is the culture that shaped me...and still does. And in this dance, in these sessions, I find something deeply personal.”

Interviewee 3

In this way, identification occurs not through origin, but through corporeal engagement: through living the gestures and rhythms that hold traditional knowledge. Interviewee 11 reflected on his Slavic background and lifelong residency in Kazakhstan. Amid recent geopolitical tensions, he found himself facing a personal crisis of cultural identity. While Kazakh dance did not provide a definitive solution, it initiated a process of internal dialogue: in his search for “Kazakh-ness” to infuse into his dance, he realized that it was already part of his life. Drinking traditional beverage Nauryz köje¹⁵ on the holiday of the Turkic new year, for example, felt just as natural and meaningful as it did for those who had grown up with the tradition.

“I wouldn’t say these are ‘Kazakh’ emotions...emotions aren’t ethnic. But I clearly sense that these are feelings that circulate within Kazakh culture, within Kazakh families. Maybe I wasn’t raised in such a family, but I’m close to it, I see it, I understand it, and I feel connected to it.”

Interviewee 3

Participant 5, also of mixed ethnic background, shared how she approached the cultures she identifies with through art: by mean of learning to play the dombra, for instance. Later, one of the kui

¹⁴ In the context of dance, third space is a space of dialogue and interaction that arises between different cultural, bodily and identity positions. It allows participants not only to express and experience differences, but also to rethink them, creating new forms of collective and personal experience through dance (Anttila et al., 2019).

¹⁵ A traditional Kazakh dish prepared to celebrate the Turkic New Year, which takes place from March 21 to 23. It traditionally consists of seven ingredients and has a slightly sour, refreshing taste (Gutman, 2013).

compositions by Nurgisa Tlendiyev became the basis for her performance that combined popping¹⁶ with elements of the traditionally gentle Kazakh dance ‘Aqqu’, infused with her personal interpretation inspired by the image of a spirited and free nomad.

For some practitioners, dance becomes a way of engaging with culture as part of their life trajectory. It may not fully define their identity, but it becomes both an enriching layer of their inner world and a space for expression where words fall short. One especially illustrative narrative comes from Interviewee 2, who initially joined the class while preparing for a compulsory choreographic exam as part of her dream of becoming an actress. Although the assignment allowed for any genre, she deliberately chose Kazakh dance as a way of demonstrating longstanding love for the culture. One of the choreographic sequences she learned during class will become her competition piece. As she shared:

“It’s in Kazakh dance that I can tell the truest story of myself.”

Interviewee 2

The theme of self-actualization is particularly prominent in the narratives of choreographers, for whom dance serves not only as a primary mode of communication through kinesthetic and plastic vocabulary, but also as a form of emotional recovery. One inspiring example is the story of an interviewee 1 – choreographer who suffered a severe spinal injury at the age of eighteen – an event that placed her professional future in dance under serious threat. However, at that very devastating moment, she was invited to take part in the filming of a documentary, dedicated to the history of Kazakh dance as seen through the story of a young dancer. She felt that this role might serve as a proper farewell to her dancing career. As interviewee 1 recalled, this experience did not become a final chapter, but, in fact, the beginning of a new path: through narrating culture on screen, she slowly began to return to herself, even though the process of physical recovery still took considerable time.

For many participants, returning to Kazakh dance is also about an attempt to restore missing links in their personal and collective identities: a recurring theme in the interviews was the recognition that the generation raised during the post-Soviet period often lacked a solid foundation in Kazakh culture in childhood, mainly in the form of language, bodily or musical practices. This absence created a rupture in the perception of their own heritage, rendering it either overly formalized or disconnected from everyday life.

¹⁶ A street dance style, characterized by sharp, rhythmic muscle contractions called “pops” or “hits”, performed in sync with the music (Gun’kina et al., 2017).

3.2 Immersive engagement and transformation of perception

“I saw Kazakh dance from a different angle...and it genuinely inspired me. My brain started working in a new direction, my neural connections began to spark!”

Interviewee 6

Kazakh dance, as taught at the “Open Ballet” studio, requires diligent work where cognitive involvement is closely tied to physical components. Participants note that practicing the dance deserves a significant investment of time, especially for those without prior dance experience. At the initial stage, with learning new choreography elements, combining them into sequences, and performing them with music, the primary focus often becomes memorizing the steps and executing them technically correctly. However, this very focus often obscures one of the essential elements of the dance: lightness.

“In Kazakh dance, lightness comes from deep internal work.”

Interviewee 1

In Kazakh dance, despite the perceived fluidity and tenderness of many movements, their execution requires active muscular engagement. Thus, achieving a balance between tension and relaxation in movement becomes a distinct form of bodily labor. As participant 3 noted, excessive relaxation can appear careless: movements lose clarity, limbs seem uncontrolled, and gestures feel unfinished. On the other hand, over-concentration on muscle control leads to stiffness: the shoulders rise, the face tenses, and the movement loses softness and natural flow. Quality performance therefore demands not mechanical control, but subtle bodily attunement that comes with experience.

Often, the pursuit of perfection in execution hinders the development of this balance. As already mentioned in the participant observation analysis, one of the key attitudes in Kazakh dance is the principle of responsibility – working with the actual capacities of one’s body in a given moment. Rather than attempting to control more than is available, it is important to respect one’s own rhythm and gradually develop one’s abilities at a sustainable and healthy pace. This attitude is seen not only as a methodological principle in dance, but also as a life principle rooted in a specific historical context:

“We were taught this even in the academy. They said: look at our ancestors, at the nomadic people. They didn’t build long-term illusions or chase the unattainable. They took what they had and worked with it. When the seasons changed, they moved on. That life wasn’t easy, but it was made possible by a deep sense of responsibility for the present moment.”

Interviewee 1

In this sense, dance practice becomes entangled with the nomadic worldview: not accumulation or idealization, but adaptability, awareness, and acceptance of current conditions. The physical practice becomes a form of embodied wisdom – a steady presence in one’s own body. When this embodied self-reflection aligns with an internal ethic, the dance gradually shifts away from mechanical execution toward a kind of plasticity essential to the Kazakh dance tradition.

Yet the process does not end there. For many participants, the perceptual transformation brought about by dance happens through the realization of deeper meanings embedded in the structure of movement. For instance, Kazakh dance is said to offer an experience of the surrounding world as an active partner: movements do not “cut through” the air but enter into it, allowing the body to be enveloped by space. This does not imply an absence of strength or sharpness, but rather a quality of care and respect for one’s surroundings. In the interviews, the movement *tolqyma*, a wave-like motion imitating the flow of water, was frequently noted as an example. When performed from the face downward, it serves as a metaphor for a process of self-cleansing. This is followed by circular movements such as *ainalma* and *orana*, through which positive energy is drawn in, lived through, released, and then returned to the world in a transformed form. In this encounter with something greater, self-centeredness fades, which makes a space for modesty, a quality many participants emphasized. In Kazakh dance, the performer does not highlight their own beauty but instead directs attention to the beauty of the world around. In this vein, the plastic structure of the dance carries the concept of ethical grounding, through which gratitude and sense of harmony with oneself and the world is cultivated. Ultimately, dance becomes a form of dialogue. Another interesting example is the women’s Kazakh dance ‘*Erke Kyz*’. Its main message is the bright, playful energy of a young girl. Through movements like *qol oynatu*, the dancer initially hides her face in shyness and then, more confidently, begins to show off her jewelry. As interviewee 12 noted:

“Even here, we see sincerity – not pride. Just a girl genuinely happy to have received beautiful earrings. And we know that in the steppe, silver was a sacred metal. Today we speak about its antiseptic properties, but back then, the main thing was its sound – it was believed to ward off evil spirits. This beauty lies in belief and gratitude.”

For many participants the practice cultivated a heightened awareness of their surroundings, which encouraged them to perceive familiar spaces with renewed attention and care. This growing spatial sensitivity also proved to be a valuable resource in other dance contexts. Participant 11, for example, even though the group choreography he was part of was designed to be expressive and bold, reflected on how engaging with Kazakh dance helped him refine his understanding of stage presence: knowing when to step back and allow space for others, for the music, and for the composition as a whole. Such physical practice demands deep engagement, which, in turn, creates an internal

resourcefulness that participants described as carrying over into their daily lives. For some, it even brought about a transformation in their sense of self. Participants shared that through this process, they developed a newfound inner stability – a shift that not only increased their confidence in dance, but also in life more broadly. With greater bodily awareness came a stronger connection to their own rhythms.

3.3 Spirituality

Although spirituality was initially intended to be one of the central themes of the study, the analysis of the interviews revealed unexpected and multilayered interpretations of the concept. Contrary to the notion of spirituality as something elevated or religiously colored, most participants described it as an everyday, quite tangible state of attention, engagement, and connectedness.

“I have two kids. Feeding them is my spirituality.”

Interviewee 10

This statement succinctly encapsulates how the participants’ understanding of spirituality is not tied to idealized images of nature, sublime or cosmic, but rather rooted in the notion of full physical and mental presence. Thus, the dichotomy of “nature versus city” is not relevant to them. As the interviews revealed, spirituality does not require withdrawal from everyday life, as it emerges from its very core. In this vein, the practice of Kazakh dance, according to participants, cultivates attentiveness to small things, thereby fostering a sense of fullness and joy rooted in the “quiet beauty” of ordinary life, which does not rely on external conditions.

“Dance doesn’t necessarily take us to the steppe or the mountains. It brings us back to what’s already around us. It teaches us to see – a blade of grass, the wind, the dust in a sunbeam. It teaches us to be here.”

Interviewee 1

A notable example frequently mentioned in the interviews was the women’s dance ‘Qamajai’, which embodies spirituality through everyday rituals. The movements in the dance reflect some of the daily activities of Kazakh women: the gesture *qainar bulaq* symbolizes braiding hair, while movements from ‘Örmek bi’ depict skillful wool collecting (*jün tegu*), thread spinning (*jün esu*), and needlework (*shiratpa, shi orau*). These actions are accompanied by particular attention to wrist articulation, which receives focused attention during warm-ups. The execution of these gestures is not a matter of mechanical repetition: the energy comes from an inner impulse, and the dance itself becomes a form of harmony attained through active participation in the process. To a certain degree, it can be understood as a state that arises naturally through sustained engagement in the unfolding of life, rather than something that must be deliberately pursued.

“Harmony, I think, is spirituality in action. It comes as a side effect...when you’re in motion, in work, in relationships, in growth, that’s when inner balance comes.”

Interviewee 7

Many participants also reflected on how spirituality reveals itself through everyday interactions with family traditions. With age and life experience, their attention gradually shifts from productivity and external accomplishments to values such as kindness and quality time with loved ones. Routines that once seemed burdensome, such as hosting guests or preparing meals, began to be perceived differently, as emotionally fulfilling moments that foster togetherness. These re-evaluations were often linked to the embodied awareness developed through Kazakh dance practice, which helped participants recognize the depth and significance of ordinary gestures. In this perspective, spirituality does not require special conditions or sacred settings, as it is rooted in simple customs that are passed down through generations.

In addition, it was particularly emphasized that true spirituality does not require grandeur or spectacle. Its vessel is the creative act itself:

“Art is not about scale. You don’t have to paint ‘Starry Night’. You can just shape a plate or dance a few movements. What matters is not how big the work is, but the act of creation itself. In those moments, you don’t feel anger, envy, or destructiveness. You create.”

Interviewee 8

This creative stance toward the world, embodied in physical practice of the dance, becomes an important spiritual anchor for many participants, especially in times of personal or social vulnerability.

3.4 Cultural awakening

One of the most prominent themes in the interviews was the participants’ re-evaluation of the significance of the folk dance art within the broader trend of renewed interest in Kazakh traditional elements, also seen as a step towards decolonization of the country’s creative potential on the basis of its cultural heritage. Although Kazakh dance had, in one form or another, been present in the lives of interviewees since childhood, it had long remained unnoticed. To a certain degree, taken for granted, without conscious appreciation of its value.

“Even when I lived in Russia and was trying to find myself, I don’t remember ever thinking about Kazakh dance. I thought more about clothing, about crafting. I’d wanted to design Kazakh-style jewelry for a long time. But dance? It never even crossed my mind.”

Interviewee 4

“Even though I grew up in a traditional Kazakh family and had been taught to respect culture and customs since childhood, I never saw such deep meaning in Kazakh dance until I started taking classes.”

Interviewee 2

Many participants learned about the classes in the ‘Open Ballet’ studio through the popular videos on social media, especially on Instagram. In this way, their entry into the practice of folk dance was closely linked to contemporary visual formats, which should be noted as an important factor in the integration of cultural content into everyday digital reality. At first glance, the motivation to join may appear superficial – part of a trend towards ethnic-fused aesthetics. However, such motivations often mask a deeper, if not immediately articulated, desire to rebuild the bond with one’s cultural roots, once shattered by certain historical injustices:

“I want to study this [dance]. It’s part of my culture. I think we’ve been disconnected from it for far too long.”

Interviewee 4

Therefore, the analysis reveals how the broader cultural shifts in Kazakhstan are reflected in the narratives of participants. They share the feeling of excitement that interest in Kazakh culture has been growing in everyday life: traditional elements such as ornaments and jewelry, once rare, are now actively reappearing in urban environments, from mass-market stores to boutique brands and showrooms. A similar trend is observed in other forms of cultural production, particularly film, music, and social media, where the Kazakh language and visual motifs are becoming increasingly normalized. This process, as participants describe, reflects a natural expansion of Kazakh culture toward the contemporary and stylish, rather than something strictly traditional or archaic. Cultural return often begins with aesthetics, through an appealing visual language and storytelling, but over time, it deepens into more thoughtful reflection on heritage.

However, participants emphasized that despite the high potential of Kazakh dance, its public visibility and availability remains limited. While Kazakh dance is slowly entering the media landscape through social platforms, this form of dissemination is not yet sufficient to ensure sustained engagement. Participants noted that with proper communication and presentation, the integration of Kazakh dance into contemporary visual and media formats could not only increase its reach, but also align organically with Kazakhstan’s current cultural dynamics. As a result, the analysis suggests that the embodied practice of Kazakh dance is a sociocultural act, integrated into the larger postcolonial processes of recovering one’s language, legacy, and self.

3.5 Kazakh dance as an embodied expression of ancestral knowledge

Participants perceive dance as one of the most profound ways to reconnect with their ancestors: through the nomadic worldview embedded in the movement vocabulary and plasticity of the dance.

To begin with, special attention in the interviews was given to the aforementioned concept of *niet* – the intention with which a movement is performed. According to participants, dance can never be neutral: it is always filled with inner intention, and the sincerity of that intention is what gives the movement its strength.

“This intention has to be right. And what does ‘right’ mean? Probably, to love sincerely.”

Interviewee 10

One vivid example is the movement *ainalma*, circular rotations of the wrists directed inward and outward. This continuous spiral is interpreted as a bodily expression of a cyclical worldview, where there is no finality: every end is seen as the beginning of a new turn. Participants noted that through the *ainalma*, one forms a sense of energy being drawn into the body and then necessarily returned outward. This is closely tied to the nomadic notion of goodness: “What is done will return to you multiplied”. By drawing in positive energy through circular movement, individuals performatively process their own experience and shares that energy further. The image of *shalkyma*, wave-like torso movements often performed with elements of *ainalma*, adds another symbolic layer. This movement is associated with a girl carrying *kumys*¹⁷ and gains metaphorical depth through the traditional shape of the *torsyk*¹⁸, the vessel used to store the drink. Due to its rounded form, the *torsyk* would always retain a bit of liquid from the previous batch, which implies the idea of continuity and transmission through trace, residue, and taste of the past. In this way, the body itself becomes a vessel of memory that never starts entirely from “zero”.

Memory in dance, then, is not abstract but a living, emotionally charged form of embodied knowledge, especially when performance is linked to a specific story. In one interview, a participant 4 recalled a dance staged to a piece of music based on a poem by Magzhan Zhumabayev, who was a poet repressed by Soviet authorities in the 20th century. Performing to such material enabled a deep engagement with collective trauma and memory, transmitted through movement.

These forms of bodily memory, as participants emphasized, have a strong educational value. Dance is perceived as an alternative to formal education. Several participants expressed the idea that Kazakh and other folk dances should be part of school curricula, which could benefit in combining

¹⁷ Traditional fermented dairy drink made from mare’s milk, very common to the Turkic ethnic groups and Central Asians (Shamaev, 2007).

¹⁸ Traditional tableware made of leather, normally used for dairy drinks (Shamaev, 2007).

physical activity with cultural understanding and make the body a channel for effective transgenerational heritage continuity.

“It would be physical exercise, spiritual nourishment, and cultural education all at once.”

Interviewee 4

Thus, Kazakh dance, in the participants’ view, is an archive without paper and knowledge without text, which allows not only for the preservation but also for the experience of culture – as part of one’s own biography. In this context, some participants also returned to the theme of nature as an essential part of this lived experience. Those who grew up in Kazakhstan’s steppe regions mentioned that open landscapes and frequent travel shaped their internal sense of space and pace. According to them, dance helps restore this feeling – not through visual imagery, but through bodily alignment with the rhythms of nature. The sense of kinship with ancestors in such moments arises with a strong realization that someone before you may have felt the same way in that same landscape. This state is described as a quiet internal anchor, which offers calm and confidence. It is important to note, however, that movements do not always carry deep meaning or a clear story. The meaning of a movement can vary: sometimes it is clear or conceptually given, while other times it emerges through personal feeling and individual interpretation rather than deliberate invention.

3.6 Music and attire

Across all interviews, music is described not as a background accompaniment, but as an equal source of meaning in Kazakh dance. For most participants, it is music that serves as the primary emotional entry point into choreography. “I try to feel the music”, shares one of the choreographers (participant 9) to express that movement, at times, is a sensory expression of what is heard.

A vivid example of music being perceived as a meaning-making force can be found in the references to the figures of sal and sere – traditional bearers of the musical, poetic, and dance cultures of the steppe. Their practice combined the roles of singers, dancers, performers, and at times even mentors. Through their art, they addressed the younger generation by awakening artistic sensitivity while simultaneously guiding it within the bounds of tradition. It is precisely the democratic nature of the culture, born in the steppe and addressed to “the whole people”, that makes their figures especially significant today.

This thread continues into the legacy of the famous 19th-century akyn Akan Sery, whose song ‘Balkadisha’ was frequently mentioned in the interviews as an example of deep, emotionally layered, yet widely accessible musical heritage. The composition, which reflects the beauty, freedom, and fragility of a young soul, was performed at the World Expo in Paris in 1925 by Amre Kashaubaev, who tragically died under unclear circumstances upon returning to the USSR. According to

participants, in the choreography set to this song, bearing traces of so many intertwined destinies from the nation's history, understanding its context allowed them to experience each element of the dance more profoundly.

A similar attitude toward music emerges in the account of Participant 5, whose dance to the composition 'Aqqu' became a personal milestone in emotional maturity. She shared that she first heard the music nearly ten years ago and immediately felt its power, but at the time, she was intimidated by its technical difficulty and set it aside. The music, which had remained in an archive for years, was chosen only when she felt ready, both in terms of technical skill and emotional readiness. Notably, the choreography also included a gesture spontaneously conceived the night before the performance: the dancer had been inspired by the Nauryz city festival scene where a woman stirred Nauryz köje in a giant pot. The gesture of lifting and lowering an invisible, weighty object was added to the dance as a living metaphor, as if the sounds of the dombra themselves suggested that this was exactly what was needed. It also demonstrates how aspects of daily life and the natural world may be incorporated into artistic creations, as it provides the audience with a feeling of coziness through familiarity and genuineness. "Any dance, like any art, becomes interesting when it carries lived experience", the participant concluded.

Thus, participants emphasized that musical material serves to unify the performance into a coherent and expressive whole, as it often guides the choreographic structure, internal motivation and conceptual framing of the dance. And again, this remains a highly open space for interpretation, including that of the music itself.

Furthermore, elements of clothing and adornment are also frequently mentioned with appreciation, particularly in two growing trends: (1) contemporary reinterpretations of traditional attire and jewelry, which help maintain a sense of integrity in the revival of cultural traditions; and (2) the way dance classes themselves inspire further exploration of these traditions. As participant 4 noted, this included learning the meanings of ornamental patterns on the clothing she bought specifically for class. Based on the overall impressions, the author would note that such attention to detail reflects the significance of dance in participants' lives, as it evokes a desire to, in a sense, recreate a full cultural picture within the modern urban context.

3.7 Choreographer as storyteller: dance as destiny and mission

This theme emerged as quite relevant across all categories of research participants. The role of the choreographer in Kazakh dance was consistently described as central, and, in many cases, fateful. At the level of regular classes at the 'Open Ballet' school, choreographers using interactive methods, such as reflective discussions, contextual explanations, and historical references, created a learning experience that extended far beyond technical training. Practitioners emphasized not only the

methodological depth of teaching, but also the choreographers' personal engagement, sincere cultural interest, and eagerness to share personal reasoning.

Participants with prior dance experience spoke especially emotionally about their teachers, pointing out how deeply a choreographer's personality could shape their development as individuals:

“She did a lot of work for the growth of our souls, for our growth as decent human beings. And I don't understand how one person could do this much. Can you imagine, one!”

Interviewee 6

The choreographers themselves described the transmission of knowledge through Kazakh dance as a profound responsibility, which implies balancing subjective interpretation with fidelity to historical and cultural accuracy. At the same time, each choreographer maintains a distinct style, whether in movement composition or pedagogical delivery. Their approach is well illustrated by an analogy that connects dance education with broader patterns in epistemological processes:

“We go to school to learn how to study – to learn how to search for information, process it, analyze it. We are not required to remember all the formulas in algebra or chemistry by heart. The main thing is to understand how logic works, how the process is structured.”

Interviewee 6

At the professional level, participants noted that despite its development, the dance scene in Kazakhstan remains relatively small and tightly connected. The same names, particularly those affiliated with the Zhurgenov Academy of Arts and the Seleznev Choreographic School, appeared frequently in interviews, which showcases stable institutional presence within the dance community.

Moreover, choreographers reflected on the importance of their stage work, describing it as another essential mode of cultural mediation. In this context, the communication shifts from a “teacher-student” format to one between performer and audience. Yet the goal remains the same: to convey experience, emotion, and meaning, albeit through a different channel:

“Yes, not through words. Emotions – through movement. I'm not a scholar or a historian. But I work with our heritage through my body. I'm a performer. And I see how, through my movements, through the emotions I experience on stage, people encounter something very deep – something you can't simply read about in a book.”

Interviewee 9

The interviews also reveal the multidimensionality of the figures involved in the sphere of Kazakh folk dance. The study included two instructors from leading universities in Kazakhstan who combine research and teaching in their professional practice. They examine Kazakh dance as both a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon, and they teach it in theory and practice. This comprehensive experience allows them to speak of dance as a complex system that requires specialists to be multifunctional and capable of interdisciplinary thinking. Thus, more than simply functional, the figure of the choreographer in Kazakh dance emerges as deeply value-laden and culturally significant. Through teaching, performance, research, and direct interaction with students and audiences, practitioners shape the contemporary landscape of Kazakh dance as a meaningful space that can only be accessed through personal participation and inner engagement.

3.8 Dance as the heritage of the future

Throughout the interviews, participants often mentioned the future of Kazakh dance: its evolving forms, directions of development, and the boundaries of authenticity. In this vein, two broad trajectories can be identified in the current context: on one hand, the academic and institutional model, associated with the theatrical stage and the preservation of formalized dance traditions; on the other, a contemporary approach grounded in personal interpretation and the influence of other choreographic traditions, including contemporary dance. Many participants emphasized that stylistic boundaries are increasingly blurred and that the Kazakh dance today has become hybrid and open, still maintaining its conceptual integrity:

“We do not follow history unquestioningly. Because we are history. We are also writing it, continuing it. We have our own colors, our own signature, our own character. We cannot be silent conduits, because that would be dishonest and untrue.”

Interviewee 10

This view of dance as an adaptive and ongoing tradition allows room for individual agency and contribution in a way of transformation, reinterpretation, and expansion of forms. What matters is not only the preservation of structure, but the infusion of relevant, contemporary meaning that connects external form with internal sincerity:

“If a person feels that this is theirs, if they carry it from within, with respect, then it is also part of the whole.”

Interviewee 10

Even as new meanings are added, the core energy of Kazakh plasticity remains, rooted in connection to the surrounding world. One performance of ‘Aqqu’ by two different dancers demonstrated how varied the interpretation could be – yet still recognizably Kazakh in its intention and equally praised by viewers.

Overall, interviewees agreed on the importance of coexistence between different approaches: some preserve the rigor and purity of tradition, while others experiment and integrate new elements:

“It’s important to have those who protect the structure, and those who ask: ‘Can it be done differently?’”

Interviewee 10

This dynamic extended into the discussions about the impossibility of “fixing” dance into a static form. Instead, dance is understood as an open system of interpretation: the same piece can be read differently by different audiences – as a metaphor for life, death, celebration, or loss. In this sense, dance is a breathing process, where each performer has a degree of advocacy. It is not preserved in stasis but reimaged by each generation.

Participants stressed that Kazakh dance is increasingly entering the space of global hybridity. To illustrate, one participant recalled how a video of Kazakh choreography filmed abroad evoked associations with Native American culture among U.S. audiences, perceived to carry universal resonances across cultures. The borrowing of motifs, participation in international workshops, and openness to diverse ideas are seen as a part of the natural evolution of a living practice.

Furthermore, participants unanimously agreed that Kazakh dance represents a significant asset of cultural capital, even if its value is expressed differently for each individual. For instance, participant 4 mentioned that when applying for international programs such as ‘Arctic Nomads’, she listed Kazakh dance as a culturally significant skill for intercultural exchange. This reflects an emerging awareness of the instrumental value of dance in representing national heritage globally. Such recognition is further evidenced by the increasing presence of folk ensembles and solo performers in international competitions.

Thus, Kazakh dance today is not a static form handed down from the past, but a medium for reflecting on the present and projecting into the future, which makes it a form of cultural thought that simultaneously maintains a connection to ancestral roots while opening space for new possibilities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how the physical practice of Kazakh folk dance supports personal growth by re-establishing a connection to nomadic heritage within contemporary urban environments. Through a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the study examined the lived experiences of practitioners, with a focus on how bodily engagement in dance gives rise to personal transformation, spiritual connection, and cultural continuity. To structure the inquiry, three sub-questions were proposed to address the central research question.

The first sub-question focused on **how specific movements and choreographic elements in Kazakh folk dance function as a means of self-actualization**. Participants described feeling emotionally grounded and physically empowered through the repetition of certain movements, with *aynalma* being the most frequently mentioned. Participants emphasized the importance of its symbolic richness and their awareness of the deeper historical context in fostering both cognitive and emotional engagement during performance. Beyond understanding the meanings of movements, great significance was attributed to the execution itself, ideally performed with a sense of lightness, but attainable only through physical investment and discipline. This process enabled participants to reconnect with their bodies and cultivate deeper care for them, along with a sense of personal fulfillment and confidence that extended beyond the studio setting. These effects were mirrored in participants' broader perception of their environment: they reported increased attentiveness to detail, heightened concentration, and greater focus in daily life.

Expanding into the cultural dimension of dance as a vessel of collective identity, the second sub-question delved into **how physical engagement with traditional elements can awaken a spiritual bond with one's heritage**. For many participants, something as simple as mimicking horseback movements became a way to feel as though they were stepping into the lives of those in the past. On a deeper, psychological level, the act of dancing rekindled a sense of belonging to the land itself and to the values, such as gratefulness, respect for traditions, down-to-earthiness, that have quietly carried Kazakh identity for generations. To further elaborate, it felt as an act of grounding themselves in something much older and greater than they are. It brought a sense of calm and quiet reassurance: "this was here before me, and it will remain after". In a world that often feels uncertain and fragile, that connection offered a kind of steadiness, or, to put it simple, something to hold onto.

The final sub-question examined **the role of the choreographer as a cultural mediator in conveying the meaning behind the plastic vocabulary of the dance**. Through their interpretive choices and pedagogical strategies, choreographers facilitated the transmission of meaning embedded in the movements, influencing how participants navigate the tradition. For both amateur dancers and academic respondents, the role of the choreographer was seen as central: it is the choreographer who

enables individuals to understand and internalize the tradition. Interestingly, participants noted that there is no single “correct” interpretation, as with an exam, but rather a subjective journey of discovery. In this vein, professional choreographers emphasized that their role is not to impose a singular vision, but to offer guiding principles that allow space for each practitioner’s personal expression. Dance, therefore, emerges as a tool for dialogue: a space where individuals come to know themselves, understand the world around them, and engage with it in an ongoing exchange of energy. It is through this lived human experience that the research also invites a reconsideration of how heritage itself is conceptualized.

The study demonstrates that participants understand folk dance heritage as co-constructed and emerging not solely from the past, but through the lived, affective, and performative actions of individuals and communities today. This perspective, grounded in ethnographic insight and theoretical reflection, provides a valuable framework for developing ethical and sustainable strategies for the promotion and preservation of dance traditions in the current cultural context. At present, however, a certain dichotomy remains in how folk dance is perceived: either as a sacred, untouched legacy preserved by educational and performance institutions, or as a flexible and evolving space open to experimentation and reinterpretation.

As folk dance classes gain popularity, they may come to function as creative hubs that foster shared experiences and contribute to a more cohesive and enriched civic society. However, this approach will require larger-scale studies with more participants to overcome the contextual limitations of this case study. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring the economic and institutional dimensions of Kazakh folk dance, particularly its growing presence in amateur, commercial dance education and its potential integration into national cultural policy. In fact, the role of folk dance in nation-building processes could be a promising direction on its own. Additionally, the development trajectory of folk dance, which was also a recurring theme in this study, could become a focal point for exploring broader questions of authenticity, agency, and the place of the current generation in shaping what future generations will recognize as the Kazakh folk dance art.

As a result, this research shows that effective management of art and cultural heritage in global contexts should start from the actual first-hand accounts of communities. It means paying attention to local creative practices and grassroots initiatives, which often reflect tradition’s presence and persistence, in a positive connotation, but also – change. As Shalabayeva (2016, p. 107), the former director of the Kasteyev Museum, writes, “The continuer of the cultural tradition is the one who turns it into an element of his spiritual being, which means recreates it anew”, once again supporting the idea of the freedom to reimagine heritage by those who live it. For cultural institutions, investors, and policymakers, this suggests the need for new support models that would not simply turn folk dance

into a market-friendly product or a tool for national branding. The findings make it clear: practices rooted in community grow best through deep engagement where there is no room for standardization or top-down agendas. While commercial potential in the realm of cultural entrepreneurship may offer intriguing directions for future research, the strength and sustainability of such practices lies in the meaning they help people to unveil. Supporting this balance requires long-term commitment and a willingness to treat culture as a living process with a myriad of human destinies and paths in it – not just a product to manage.

Ultimately, Kazakh folk dance is not a magical cure that instantly provides all the benefits described above. Nor is it a portal to the past that effortlessly reestablishes lost connections with collective ancestral consciousness. However, it is undoubtedly one of the doors through which such a journey can begin. The most valuable insight this research has revealed is the participants' awareness that dance is, above all, a practice: it demands both intellectual and physical effort. And it is through this process that self-actualization takes place, often as a byproduct of sustained engagement. The results, of course, vary depending on individual interest and motivation. Still, even with a limited number of interviews, this study radiates a sense of enthusiasm and possibility – something that is, in itself, deeply inspiring.

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APPENDICES

1. Interview guideline

1.1 Original version

Гайд по полуструктурированному интервью

Данный гайд разработан с целью получения разнообразных взглядов на то, как практика казахского народного танца способствует самореализации и культурному восстановлению. Разделение участников на любителей, профессиональных хореографов и исследователей позволяет подойти к теме более многогранно: любители делятся опытом личного обогащения и открытия культурных корней, хореографы подчеркивают важность повествования и педагогики, а исследователи вносят историческую и теоретическую перспективу.

1. Общая вводная часть и получение согласия (для всех участников)

- Поблагодарить участников за их время и кратко представить цель исследования;
- Запросить письменное согласие на участие, включая разрешение на аудиозапись интервью, с использованием формы согласия С1 Эразмус Университета Роттердама, соответствующей этическим и конфиденциальным требованиям;
- Попросить участников представить себя и указать уровень своей вовлеченности в народный танец — как любителей, профессиональных хореографов или исследователей/преподавателей. Также всем участникам будет предложено рассказать об общем опыте в танце, с особым акцентом на участие в казахском народном танце.

2. Гайд для интервью с любителями (непрофессионалы, ученики студии «Open Ballet»)

- **Самореализация через танец**
 - Что мотивирует вас изучать казахский народный танец и что вы чувствуете, когда танцуете?
 - В чем, по вашему опыту, танец помогает выразить эмоции, которые сложно передать словами или в повседневной жизни?
 - Изменилось ли ваше восприятие себя и своего тела благодаря участию в этих занятиях?
- **Связь с культурным наследием**
 - В какой степени, если таковая имеется, вы чувствуете связь с кочевым наследием Казахстана, когда танцуете?
 - Как бы вы описали своё понимание или личный опыт духовности?
 - Возникало ли у вас когда-либо чувство духовной или эмоциональной связи с движениями, историями или символами танца? Как эти жесты и движения формируют ваше восприятие окружающего мира и природы?
- **Роль хореографа и процесс обучения**
 - Как хореограф объясняет смысл танцевальных движений?

- Какую роль, по вашему мнению, играет хореограф в том, чтобы помочь понять глубокое значение танца?
- Как, по-вашему, танец может служить средством передачи предковского знания и культурной памяти? Какова роль хореографа в этом процессе и как вы воспринимаете свою собственную роль?
- **Личные размышления**
 - Как изменилось ваше понимание казахского народного танца с начала занятий? В чем изменилось ваше восприятие этого танца?
 - Как танец повлиял на восприятие себя и вашего взаимодействия с окружающим миром?
 - Как казахский народный танец способствует чувству личного наполнения или осмысленности?
 - Какие у вас надежды и ожидания относительно будущего казахского народного танца как важной части культурного наследия нации?

3. Гайд для интервью с профессиональными хореографами и исполнителями

- **Танец как путь самореализации**
 - Что побудило вас заняться казахским народным танцем профессионально и что продолжает вдохновлять вас в этой практике?
 - Как, по вашему опыту, танец способствует самопознанию и личностному росту?
 - Какие изменения вы наблюдали у своих учеников благодаря танцу? Были ли у вас личные трансформации?
- **Духовные и культурные аспекты наследия казахского народного танца**
 - Какие хореографические стратегии или творческие решения вы используете, чтобы передать истории, символы или значения, связанные с казахским культурным наследием?
 - Как вы понимаете или ощущаете духовность, если это релевантно?
 - В чем, по-вашему, танец может служить средством духовной связи с кочевыми предками? Какова ваша роль в этом процессе и как вы видите роль своих учеников?
 - Есть ли конкретные движения, которые вы считаете особенно глубоко укоренёнными в кочевом наследии?
- **Роль хореографа как рассказчика**
 - Какие хореографические приёмы или творческие подходы вы используете для передачи историй, символов и смыслов, связанных с казахским наследием? Какую роль в этом процессе играет музыка?
 - С какими трудностями вы сталкиваетесь, стараясь донести до учеников историко-культурную глубину каждого движения?
 - Как вы находите баланс между сохранением традиции и внедрением инноваций в своей хореографической практике? Какие элементы, на ваш взгляд, являются ключевыми и должны быть сохранены — и почему?
- **Личные размышления**

- Как с течением времени изменилось ваше понимание казахского народного танца?
- Как вы воспринимаете меняющуюся роль народного танца в современном культурном ландшафте Казахстана?
- Какие надежды и ожидания вы связываете с будущим казахского народного танца как важного элемента культурного наследия нации?

4. Гайд для интервью с исследователями, специализирующимися на народном танце

- **Роль народного танца в культурной преемственности**

- Как, по вашим исследованиям, трансформировался казахский народный танец со временем? Какие факторы повлияли на эти изменения?
- Какие ключевые элементы традиции, по вашему мнению, остаются неизменными?
- Как вы оцениваете роль народного танца в сохранении основных аспектов кочевой идентичности, особенно её связи с природой, в условиях современной городской среды?

- **Воплощённое наследие и самореализация**

- Чем народный танец отличается от других форм культурного выражения в контексте личного развития?
- Может ли танец способствовать укреплению чувства принадлежности к широкой культурной традиции?

- **Хореография и повествование в народном танце**

- Какие эмоции и переживания, по вашему мнению, могли испытывать исполнители в прошлом, когда исполняли движения, ныне признанные частью казахского народного танца? Как эти движения отражают их образ жизни и культурные убеждения?
- Как хореографы справляются с задачей сохранения аутентичности при адаптации танца к современным зрителям? Насколько важно сохранять этот баланс – и почему?

- **Личные размышления**

- Как изменилось ваше понимание казахского народного танца с течением времени?
- Как вы оцениваете изменяющуюся роль народного танца в культурной жизни современного Казахстана?
- Какие перспективы и надежды вы связываете с будущим казахского народного танца как важной составляющей национального наследия?

5. Заключение (для всех участников)

- Есть ли что-то ещё, чем вы хотели бы поделиться в контексте вашего личного или профессионального опыта, связанного с казахским народным танцем?
- Какой совет вы бы дали человеку, который хочет начать заниматься этим танцем?

- Благодарность участнику за участие и поделённые размышления.

1.2 Translated English version

Semi-Structured interview guideline

This interview guideline is structured to capture diverse perspectives on how Kazakh folk dance fosters self-actualization and cultural reconnection. Dividing participants into leisure practitioners, professional choreographers, and researchers allows for a nuanced approach: practitioners provide insight into personal fulfillment and cultural rediscovery, choreographers highlight storytelling and pedagogy, and researchers offer historical and theoretical context.

1. General introduction and consent (for all participants)

- Expressing gratitude to the participants for their time and introduce the purpose of the study;
- Asking for written consent, including consent for recording the interview, using EUR's C1 Consent form to address ethical and privacy considerations;
- Participants will be invited to introduce themselves and specify their level of engagement with folk dance—as leisure practitioners, professional choreographers, or researchers/academics. In addition, all participants will be asked to describe their general experience with dance, with particular attention to their involvement in Kazakh folk dance.

2. Interview guide for leisure practitioners (non-professionals, students of 'Open Ballet' studio)

- **Self-actualization through dance**
 - What motivates you to learn Kazakh folk dance and how do you feel when you practice it?
 - In what ways does dance help you express emotions that might be difficult to articulate through words or in everyday life?
 - Has participating in these dance classes changed the way you see yourself or your body?
- **Connection to heritage**
 - In what ways, if any, does dancing make you feel connected to Kazakh nomadic heritage?
 - How would you describe your understanding or experience of spirituality, if any?

- Have you ever felt a spiritual or emotional connection to the movements, stories, or symbols within the dance, and how do these specific gestures and movements shape your perception of the surrounding world and nature?
- **Role of the choreographer and learning process**
 - How does the choreographer explain the meaning behind the dance movements?
 - What role do you think the choreographer plays in helping dancers understand the profound meaning behind?
 - In what ways do you think dance can serve as a medium for transmitting ancestral knowledge or cultural memory? What role does the choreographer play in this process, and how would you describe your own role within it?
- **Personal reflections**
 - How has your understanding of Kazakh folk dance evolved since you began practicing it, and in what ways has your perception of it changed over time?
 - In what ways has dance influenced your perception of yourself and your relationship to the world around you?
 - How does Kazakh folk dance contribute to your sense of personal fulfillment or meaning?
 - What are your hopes and expectations for the future of Kazakh folk dance as a vital element of the nation's cultural heritage?

3. Interview guide for professional choreographers and performers

- **Dance as a path to self-actualization**
 - What motivates you to engage with Kazakh folk dance on a professional level, and what continues to inspire your commitment to this practice?
 - In your experience, how does dance contribute to a person's self-awareness and personal growth?
 - What kinds of transformations, if any, have you observed in your students through dance? Have you experienced any personal transformations yourself?
- **Spiritual and cultural dimensions of Kazakh folk dance**
 - What choreographic strategies or creative decisions do you use to convey specific stories, symbols, or meanings rooted in Kazakh heritage?
 - How would you describe your understanding or experience of spirituality, if any?

- In what ways do you think folk dance can serve as a medium for spiritual connection to nomadic ancestry? How would you describe your role in this process, and how do you see the role of your students within it?
- Are there particular movements that you consider deeply rooted in Kazakh nomadic heritage?
- **The role of the choreographer as a storyteller**
 - What choreographic strategies or creative decisions do you use to convey specific stories, symbols, or meanings rooted in Kazakh heritage? What role does music play in this process?
 - What challenges do you face in making sure students understand the historical and cultural depth of each movement?
 - In your choreographic practice, how do you navigate the balance between tradition and innovation in folk dance? In your view, which elements are essential to preserve, and why?
- **Personal reflections**
 - How has your understanding of Kazakh folk dance evolved since you began practicing it, and in what ways has your perception of it changed over time?
 - How do you perceive the evolving role of folk dance within Kazakhstan's contemporary cultural landscape?
 - What are your hopes and expectations for the future of Kazakh folk dance as a vital element of the nation's cultural heritage?

4. Interview guide for scholars specializing in folk dance

- **The role of folk dance in cultural continuity**
 - Based on your research, how has Kazakh folk dance evolved over time, and what factors have influenced its transformation?
 - Which core elements of the tradition do you see as remaining consistent despite these changes?
 - How do you perceive the role of folk dance in preserving key aspects of nomadic identity, particularly its connection to nature, within contemporary urban environments?
- **Embodied heritage and self-actualization**
 - How does folk dance differ from other forms of cultural expression in terms of personal fulfillment?

- Can dance be a means of reinforcing a sense of belonging to a larger cultural narrative?
- **Choreography and storytelling in folk dance**
 - What emotions and experiences do you think historical performers may have embodied through the movements now recognized as Kazakh folk dance? How do these movements reflect their way of life and underlying cultural beliefs?
 - How do choreographers navigate the challenge of maintaining authenticity while adapting folk dance for contemporary audiences? In your view, how important is this balance, and why?
- **Personal reflections**
 - How has your understanding of Kazakh folk dance evolved since you began practicing it, and in what ways has your perception of it changed over time?
 - How do you perceive the evolving role of folk dance within Kazakhstan's contemporary cultural landscape?
 - What are your hopes and expectations for the future of Kazakh folk dance as a vital element of the nation's cultural heritage?
- **Closing remarks (for all participants)**
 - Is there anything else you would like to share about your personal or professional experience with Kazakh folk dance that we haven't discussed?
 - What advice would you offer to someone who is interested in beginning to practice Kazakh folk dance?
 - Expressing appreciation for the participation.

2. Consent forms

2.1 Original version

Форма согласия С1

Информационная форма и форма согласия (этика и конфиденциальность)

Дата: 26/03/2025

Классификация: Исследование для магистерской диссертации

Название исследования: Воплощённый опыт казахского народного танца: восстановление связи с кочевым наследием в условиях городской среды

Исследователь: Дана Неталиева, University Erasmus Rotterdam

Уважаемый участник,

Меня зовут Дана Неталиева, я студентка University Erasmus Rotterdam и провожу исследование в рамках своей магистерской диссертации по программе Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's «Managing Art and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets (MAGMa)». Это исследование проводится независимо и не финансируется внешними организациями.

В этом документе изложены цель исследования, его процедура и аспекты конфиденциальности. Пожалуйста, внимательно ознакомьтесь с ним. Если что-то окажется непонятным, не стесняйтесь задавать вопросы или отмечать неясные фрагменты текста.

Подписывая эту форму, вы подтверждаете своё добровольное участие в исследовании.

О чём это исследование?

Настоящее исследование посвящено тому, как практика казахского народного танца способствует самореализации личности и восстановлению связи с нематериальным культурным наследием в условиях современного города. Исследование фокусируется на личном опыте и культурной значимости телесного выражения, в частности — на примере школы «Open Ballet» в Алматы.

Почему вас пригласили принять участие?

Вы приглашены к участию, поскольку:

- а) Вы активно посещаете занятия по казахскому народному танцу в школе «Open Ballet», и ваш опыт важен для понимания вклада этой формы искусства в культурную связь и личностный рост;
- б) Вы являетесь профессиональным участником сферы казахского народного танца.

Чего ожидать от участия?

Исследование продлится 3 месяца и включает:

- Участие в наблюдении за занятиями (исследователь приняла участие в 6 занятиях);
- Одно полуструктурированное интервью продолжительностью около 45–60 минут, согласованное с вами по времени.

Участие является полностью добровольным. Вы можете отказаться отвечать на любые вопросы или прекратить участие в исследовании в любой момент без объяснения причин и последствий.

Возможные риски или неудобства

Риски или дискомфорт при участии в исследовании не ожидаются.

Возможные выгоды

Финансовая выгода не предусмотрена, однако ваше участие поможет сохранить и глубже понять нематериальное культурное наследие Казахстана и может быть полезным для будущих инициатив в сфере культурного благополучия.

Какие персональные данные будут собраны?

Могут быть собраны следующие данные:

- Имя (по желанию), возраст, пол
- Род занятий, этническое происхождение (по желанию)
- Аудиозапись интервью
- Личные мнения, чувства и размышления о народном танце и культурном наследии

Ваш адрес электронной почты может быть запрошен только для отправки результатов исследования, если вы захотите их получить.

Как будут защищены ваши данные?

- Все данные будут надёжно храниться и будут доступны только исследователю.
- Аудиозаписи будут расшифрованы, и ваше имя будет заменено псевдонимом или номером.
- Любые цитаты, использованные в диссертации или публикации, будут анонимизированы, если только вы не дадите отдельное разрешение на указание имени.
- Данные будут храниться до 10 лет в соответствии с политикой Университета Эразма, чтобы обеспечить академическую проверку. Контактные данные будут удалены в течение одного года.

Использование данных в будущих исследованиях

Ваши анонимизированные данные могут быть использованы для будущих академических исследований или образовательных целей. Никакая информация, позволяющая установить личность, не будет раскрыта без вашего согласия.

Что будет с результатами исследования?

Результаты будут опубликованы в магистерской диссертации. По запросу вы можете получить копию результатов, обратившись к исследователю.

Вопросы или сомнения?

Если у вас есть вопросы об исследовании или о своих правах в отношении данных (включая доступ, изменение или удаление), пожалуйста, свяжитесь со мной:

Исследователь: Дана Неталиева

Телефон: +77771154990

Email: 744840dn@student.eur.nl

Форма согласия

Подписывая данную форму, вы подтверждаете, что:

1. Вы прочли и поняли предоставленную информацию.
2. Добровольно соглашаетесь принять участие в исследовании.
3. Вам исполнилось не менее 18 лет.
4. Согласны на сбор и использование ваших персональных данных, как описано выше.
5. Понимаете, что участие является добровольным и может быть прекращено в любой момент.
6. Согласны на использование анонимизированных данных в академических целях.

Пожалуйста, отметьте соответствующие пункты ниже:

- ☐ Я даю согласие на сбор специальных категорий данных (например, этническое происхождение);
- ☐ Я даю согласие на аудиозапись интервью;
- ☐ Я даю согласие на использование анонимизированных цитат в академических публикациях;
- ☐ Я даю согласие на то, чтобы со мной связались для участия в будущих исследованиях.

Имя участника:
Подпись участника:
Дата:

Вы получите копию данной формы согласия. Благодарим вас за участие и вклад в это исследование.

2.2 Translated English version

C1 Consent form

Information and consent form (ethics and privacy)

Date: 26/03/2025

Classification: Master's thesis research

Title of Research: The embodied experience of Kazakh folk dance art: reconnecting to nomadic heritage in urban contexts

Researcher: Dana Netaliyeva, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Dear Participant,

I am Dana Netaliyeva, a student at Erasmus University Rotterdam, currently conducting research as part of my master's thesis in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme "Managing Arts and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets (MAGMa)." This research is conducted independently and is not influenced by any external funding.

This document outlines the purpose, process, and privacy aspects of the study. Please read it carefully. If anything is unclear, feel free to ask questions or mark any part of the text.

By signing this form, you confirm your voluntary participation.

What is the research about?

This study explores how the practice of Kazakh folk dance fosters self-actualization and reconnects individuals with intangible cultural heritage in contemporary urban environments. It focuses on personal experiences and the cultural significance of embodied movement, particularly within the 'Open Ballet' dance school in Almaty.

Why are you invited to participate?

You have been invited because you are:

- a) an active participant in Kazakh folk dance classes at the Open Ballet school, and your experiences are valuable for understanding how this form of dance contributes to cultural reconnection and personal growth;
- b) an active professional participant in Kazakh folk dance.

What can you expect?

The research will take place over a 3-month period. It includes:

- **Participant observation** during folk dance classes (the researcher attended and participated in 6 sessions).
- **One semi-structured interview** lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, scheduled at your convenience.

Participation is voluntary. You can decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or consequences.

What are the potential risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participation.

What are the benefits?

While there are no direct financial benefits, your participation will contribute to the preservation and understanding of Kazakh intangible cultural heritage and may inform future initiatives related to cultural well-being.

What personal data will be collected?

The following personal data may be collected:

- Name (optional), age, gender
- Occupation, ethnic background (optional)
- Audio recording of interview
- Sentiments, reflections, and opinions on folk dance and heritage

Your email address may be collected only for the purpose of sharing study results if requested.

How will your data be protected?

- All data will be stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.
- Audio recordings will be transcribed, and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym or number.
- Any quotes used in the thesis or publication will be anonymized unless explicit permission is given.
- Data will be stored for up to 10 years in line with Erasmus University's data policy to allow for academic verification. Contact details will be deleted within one year.

Use of Data in Future Research

Your anonymized data may be used for future academic studies or educational purposes. No identifiable information will be disclosed without your consent.

What happens with the results?

The results will be published in a master's thesis. You may request a copy of the findings by contacting the researcher.

Questions or Concerns?

If you have any questions regarding this study or your data rights (including access, updates, or deletion), please contact:

Researcher: Dana Netaliyeva

Phone: +77771154990

Email: 744840dn@student.eur.nl

Declaration of Consent

By signing below, you confirm that:

1. You have read and understood the information provided above.
2. You voluntarily agree to participate in the study.
3. You are at least 18 years old.
4. You agree to the collection and use of your personal data as described.
5. You understand that your participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time.
6. You consent to anonymized data being used for academic purposes.

Please check the relevant boxes below:

- ☐ I consent to the collection of special category data (e.g., ethnic background).
- ☐ I consent to audio recording during the interview.
- ☐ I consent to the use of anonymized quotes in academic publications.
- ☐ I give permission to be contacted for future research.

Participant's Name:

Participant's Signature:

Date:

You will receive a copy of this consent form. Thank you for your participation and contribution to this research.

3. Codebook

No.	Theme	Code (examples)	Meaning
1	Identity and self-expression	The 'I' in dance	Expression of one's personal style or character in dance
		Dancing the nomadic self	Contemporary rearticulation of ancestral mobility as a way of self-identification
		Expressing individuality	Refers to how the unique characteristics of Kazakh dance can serve as a medium for enhancing and expressing one's personal identity.
		Searching for oneself	Expression of the search for one's roots and origins through folk dance
		National identity	Expression of Kazakh folk dance as a means of uniting people and strengthening Kazakhstani civic identity

		Where words fail	Expression of how participants are sometimes able to say more through dance than through words
		Versatility	Dance as a means of fostering many-sided personal growth
2	Immersive engagement and transformation of perception	Physical transformation	Improvement in technique and a deeper understanding and awareness of one's body
		Modesty and grace as an aesthetic of movement	A shift in focus from the performer to the environment through greater movement awareness
		The wonder of neuroplasticity	Cognitive engagement with the practice followed by a bodily memory response
		Emotional regulation through dance	The ability to let go and relax
		Positive impact of dance in and beyond the studio	Various positive effects participants noted in their lives both within and outside the studio, such as improved concentration and increased confidence
		The butterfly effect	A significant emotional transformation resulting from what initially seemed like a small act of engaging in folk dance practice
3	Spirituality	"Everyday" in dance	Finding the spiritual within daily domestic routines through dance
		Spatial awareness	Engaging deeply with the surrounding world as a result of full emotional and physical presence
		Influence of environment on embodiment and thought	A reference to the vastness of the steppe, where ancestors once lived, as a factor that fosters the expansion of one's sensory perception
		Freedom	Spirituality as contentment with oneself and one's surroundings, regardless of others' opinions
		Dance as a universal mode of being	Spirituality as the outcome of continuous movement
		Spirituality through gratitude	Recognizing the sacredness of life through awareness and appreciation of all that one has
4	Cultural awakening	Kazakhization	Growing interest in and integration of Kazakh culture in the arts, cinema, fashion, and other spheres of life
		Transitional generation	A generation born shortly before or after the collapse of the USSR, shaped by its consequences
		Taken for granted	The idea that folk dance, although always present in participants' lives, was long overlooked or undervalued
		Inner connection	How participants often describe the reason they were drawn to folk dance
		Colonization and oppression	Historical events that caused significant harm to the country and its cultural heritage

		Knowledge gap	The absence or lack of knowledge about many cultural practices
5	Kazakh dance as an embodied expression of ancestral knowledge	Symbolism and wisdom in dance elements	Applied to descriptions of specific movements with deeper cultural or philosophical meanings
		Deep motivation	Participants' drive to practice dance rooted in viewing it as cultural heritage
		Dance as a mediator of cultural knowledge	Expressions of dance as a source or vessel of traditional knowledge
		Tengrianism	The medieval religious beliefs of the nomadic peoples of the vast steppes of Eurasia and Central Asia, as described in the Contextual Background section (page 14). The notion was frequently mentioned in discussions about ancestral connection and cosmological worldview.
		Dance as space of memory and historical dialogue	Understanding dance as a portal to the past and a means of engaging with history
		Connection to nature	Aspects of dance tied to natural elements and the environment
6	Music and attire	The role of music	Applied to mentions of the importance of music in dance
		Personal traditions	Individual rituals of participants that involve engagement with culture, often through folk music
		Contemporary interpretation of traditional clothing	The growing popularity of ethno-style fashion
		Inspiration	Folk music referred as a source of motivation and inspiration for engaging in Kazakh dance
		A people of hearing	Description of Kazakhs as a highly musical people who intuitively grasp and absorb through sound
		Responsibility through historical knowledge	A sense of duty or emotional weight that emerges when participants learn the history behind a dance or musical piece
7	Choreographer as storyteller: dance as destiny and mission	The textbook of Kazakh dance	Something impossible to follow, as it does not exist: reflects the desire to present one's own vision of the dance in a personal style
		Narrative coherence	The importance of a cohesive storyline in dance for choreographers.
		Embodied learning	Describes the most effective way to absorb and internalize knowledge
		The role of the choreographer	Applied whenever the significance of the choreographer is mentioned by practitioners.

		Bringing Kazakh dance to the public	Refers to the desire to raise greater awareness of the discipline
		Understanding dance as a mission	Choreographers perceive folk dance as a kind of mission to facilitate dialogue between heritage and those seeking to connect with it.
8	Dance as the heritage of the future	Exchange and intercultural dialogue	An important aspect in the formation and development of dance
		Culture as process	Expresses the dynamic rather than static nature of cultural practices, including dance, and implies their capacity for transformation
		Art beyond fixed interpretation	Reflects the complexity of documenting and recording dance due to its interpretive nature and the freedom of personal meaning-making
		Adding one's own colours while preserving the concept/story	A potential trajectory for the development of folk dance that allows for innovation and individual style while maintaining traditional ideas and concepts
		Trendiness	Anticipation of folk dance becoming popularized among wider audiences as a form of recreational learning
		"In the beginning was Action"	An expressive way of conveying the belief that dance was, is, and will always be; everything begins and returns to movement.

4. Use of AI

In the course of writing this thesis, I made limited use of digital language tools, including Grammarly and QuillBot for grammar and spelling checks, and ChatGPT for occasional translation support with interview guideline and transcripts. These tools were employed in a minimal and supplementary manner, without influencing the substance or originality of the work.

5. Table of video materials

Video No.	Description	Date published/accessed /recorded	Source and link
1	Example of the 'Orteke' performance by Khassen Tolganay	02.10.2023	Khassen's open YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/qAAANMSsbAw?si=v0WCk4vLuUD14fGD
2	'Qara Jorga' dance video, performed by 'Nomad' choreography academy	12.12.2022	'NOMAD' Choreography Academy's open YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/DnIWYyz_xeY?si=xrFJs6OAHrhjzPEH

3	Kazakh dance 'Jetigen', performed by 'Nomad' choreography academy	31.10.2022	'NOMAD' Choreography Academy's open YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/LhGa84EVtSk?si=iOlt_eMgM7MK_Vdq2
4	Composition 'Ansau' by the 'Hassak' Ethno-Folk Group	09.03.2021	'Hassak' Ethno-Folk Group's open YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/o-qhI3Sbhys?si=pm4MBIb8SKKQIrhA
5	Example of Shara Zhiyenkulova's performance	25.02.2025	Altynqor's open digital archive of video and audio materials from Kazakhstan's television and radio broadcasting: https://altynqor.com/video/195
6	Choreography in the style of Kazakh folk dance by Janel Ulanova, performed by Madina Sadubaeva to the composition 'Keshikpey kelem dep-en' by Shamshi Kaldayakov	06.05.2024	Open personal Instagram page of Janel Ulanova: https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6oADteip_d/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D
7	's viral contemporary interpretation of 'Aqqu' at Almaty Dance Fest 2023, which garnered nearly half a million views	25.03.2023	Open personal Instagram page of Zarina Toleulova: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqNWcYPAXfX/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
8	Traditional version of 'Aqqu' folk dance, choreographed by Anvara Sadykova and performed by Akqanat Smagulova	23.09.2020	Official open YouTube channel of the Kazakh National Academy of Choreography: https://youtu.be/e-dkD7vYYRM?si=PZLT_1RQWK0xtwy3
9	Akerke Batyrbek performing a dance incorporating elements of Kazakh choreography to Camille Saint-Saëns' 'The Swan', arranged for the traditional Kazakh instrument qobyz by Maqsat Medeubek	10.12.2024	Maqsat Medeubek's open YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/AHtxyorO0Sg?si=oMz3ORqgwaBgOS_o
10	Study and practice of choreography set to the music of the 'Hassak' ethno-folk group (1)	16.03.2025	Video recorded by the author and accessible through Google Drive: https://drive.google.com/file/d/15Kxw1bM3K4TVqpzHkbE8BwHhFUklqnT6/view?usp=drive_link

11	Study and practice of choreography set to the music of the 'Hassak' ethno-folk group (2)	16.03.2025	Video recorded by the author and accessible through Google Drive: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SqJXgYGkfHHQLHvIQXPp7iputNb8onul/view?usp=drive_link
12	Study and practice of choreography set to the 'Ruh Therapy' by Bagjan Oktyabr	23.02.2025	Video recorded by the author and accessible through Google Drive: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JEfjEPrrrep1sYlbnITVi6Fper5aYjzJ5/view?usp=drive_link

[Word count: 18 557 (excluding bibliography, tables, figures, image and video credits, as well as appendices)]