

Culture of Leisure of Men and Women in the 18th – 20th Centuries and Modern Kazakh Society: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This research contributes to the understanding of the cultural heritage of Kazakhstan by studying the evolution of gender-divided leisure practices of Kazakh society from the 18th century to the present, a time of deep social transformations. The aim of the work is a comparative analysis of leisure practices among men and women in Kazakh society, revealing the changes that occurred under the influence of external factors and modernization processes. The methodological basis of this research is the historical-comparative approach, which involves analysing ethnographic sources, archival data, and modern research to systematise and compare data on traditional and modern forms of leisure. The results show that in traditional Kazakh society, leisure culture was deeply connected to the nomadic lifestyle, where men's leisure time predominantly included physical activities and women's leisure time was centred on domestic crafts and family festivals. The influence of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union led to a transformation in these practices, including the emergence of new social forms of leisure, such as sports sections, clubs, and cultural activities in which women began to actively participate. In modern Kazakhstan, there is an integration of traditional and modern activities where both men and women can engage in a variety of leisure activities, from fitness to participation in ethno-festivals, reflecting both the modernization of society and a return to national roots. The findings of the paper confirm that leisure culture has become more universal, offering a wide range of opportunities for self-expression while strengthening gender equality.

Keywords: Gender, Crafts, Social norms, Values, Globalisation

1 Introduction

The last three centuries were a time of profound transformations of social and cultural norms that have influenced gender roles and leisure practices. In Kazakh society, leisure culture, like other social spheres, was originally closely linked to the nomadic way of life and fulfilled important cultural functions, including the strengthening of family and interpersonal ties and the transmission of traditions and values. However, the intervention of the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union, and later globalisation led to significant changes, forcing Kazakh society to adapt its cultural norms and leisure practices under the influence of new economic, political, and cultural conditions. Understanding these transformations can contribute to a better understanding of contemporary gender practices and cultural heritage in Kazakhstan, as well as strategies for maintaining cultural identity in the face of globalisation.

Globalisation has transformed leisure culture into a universal space where traditional and modern forms of leisure intersect, in part by enhancing cultural exchange processes. Thanks to access to international information, mass communication media, and the changing pace of life, Kazakh society has become familiar

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with new types and forms of leisure activities, such as mass sports, tourism, and various recreational activities that were not previously characteristic of Kazakh culture. Such exposure has had an impact on the gradual erosion of strict gender boundaries in leisure activities, opening up new opportunities for self-fulfilment for men and women, as well as the formation of more individualised preferences.

Leisure practices in Kazakhstan have long served as a mirror reflecting the shifting contours of gender, identity, and authority across historical epochs. From Soviet-era state campaigns such as the "Women's Red Yurt," which sought to reshape traditional gender roles through socialist mobilisation (Ramsay, 2021), to contemporary online expressions of masculinity and sexuality (Dall'Agnola & Thibault, 2021; Thibault, 2022), leisure has remained deeply entangled with broader socio-political transformations. Scholars have highlighted how Soviet policies produced a unique paradox for women, neither fully colonised nor fully emancipated, within the Soviet modernisation project (Kandiyoti, 2007). Post-independence Kazakhstan continues to navigate these legacies amid globalisation and re-traditionalisation, with evolving discourses around marriage, migration, and gender norms (Blum, 2016, 2019; Kudaibergenova, 2018). Recent research has also illuminated how Islamic media articulate male authority through leisure domains such as sport (Bigozhin, 2019), while digital platforms complicate traditional boundaries of gendered behaviour and morality (Dall'Agnola, 2024). These transformations underscore the importance of leisure as a lens for understanding cultural change, gender politics, and the construction of national identity in contemporary Kazakh society.

Abdigapbarova (2023) investigated gender issues in Kazakh literature of the early 20th century, focusing on changes in the cultural and social roles of men and women during this period. In the context of leisure studies, the author draws attention to how the literature of the time reflected traditional and new forms of leisure, influencing the perception of gender roles in Kazakh society. The paper also analyses how changes in social and cultural life contributed to the formation of different approaches to leisure for men and women in the XVIII-XX centuries, as well as in modern Kazakh society. Aralbay et al. (2023) examined the role of women in nomadic Kazakh traditions, emphasising their key importance in shaping the national code and identity. The authors analysed historical practices, focussing on women's contributions to the cultural and social development of Kazakh society. This study offers vital information about the cultural and gender aspects of Kazakh nomadic life and their impact on contemporary social norms and gender roles in Kazakhstan.

Religious syncretism has been studied by Assanbayev and Hanks (2023), as have Sufism and the role of Ishans in nomadic Kazakh society, focusing on spiritual practices and their impact on everyday life. The authors examined how Sufi traditions and the interaction of different religious movements influenced the social structure and cultural practices of Kazakhs, including the recreation and leisure activities of men and women. This study helps us understand religious and cultural transformations in the context of nomadic life and their reflection in contemporary Kazakh realities. Elmuratovna (2024) examined the roles of women in traditional nomadic societies, emphasising their central role in the preservation and transmission of cultural and social traditions. The author analyses how these roles have evolved in the context of nomadic life, as well as the changes that have occurred in contemporary Kazakh society. This study provides valuable insights into how cultural and gender norms influenced the leisure and recreation of men and women in different historical periods.

Ispandiyarova and Absadyk (2024) analysed the concept of women in Kazakh folk lyrics, identifying traditional representations of women's role in society through poetic heritage. The authors examined how these images correlated with changes in the social status of women in Kazakh society in the course of historical and cultural developments. The work helps to understand how cultural representations of women have influenced men's and women's leisure and recreation in different eras, as well as contemporary changes in these practices. Menti and Sideri (2020) analysed the changing position of women in literature from traditional society to modernity, highlighting the impact of cultural and social changes on the role of women in different historical contexts. This study provides a better understanding of how traditional and modern social attitudes have shaped men's and women's leisure and recreation, including in Kazakh society, where the transition from traditional to modern is also accompanied by changes in gender roles and cultural practices.

Nuryшева and Kaldayeva (2020) investigated the image of women in the traditional Kazakh worldview, focusing on the importance of women's roles in family and social life, as well as their cultural and spiritual responsibilities. This study analysed how traditional perceptions of women and their role in society have influenced the culture of leisure and recreation in Kazakh society, as well as changes in these practices from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and in modern times.

Since independence, Kazakh society, including the younger generation, has become more interested in ethnocultural festivals, national sports and crafts, which creates a unique cultural space. These processes of transformation and their impact on the culture of leisure emphasise the relevance of analysing the gender aspect of leisure and allow us to identify its role in contemporary cultural practices in Kazakhstan. Despite the many studies on traditional and contemporary gender roles in Kazakh society, little attention has been paid specifically to the comparative analysis of cultural practices of leisure, their gender specificities, and the impact of globalisation on these aspects. The existing gap in research is the lack of comparative data on the differences and similarities in the leisure activities of men and women in different historical periods, which limits the understanding of the process of adaptation of Kazakh society to modern conditions.

The aim of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of men's and women's leisure culture in Kazakh society in the 18th – 20th centuries and in the modern era to reveal the patterns of leisure transformations under the influence of socio-historical changes and globalisation, as well as to determine the significance of these changes for the preservation of cultural identity and for gender equality. The main objectives of the research are to study the traditional forms of leisure activities for men and women in the nomadic community and to consider the influence of religious, social, and cultural norms on gender aspects of leisure. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive comparative analysis of gender-specific leisure practices in Kazakh society from the 18th century to the present, integrating ethnographic, archival, and cultural data to reveal how socio-political transformations, colonisation, Sovietisation, and globalisation, have reshaped gender roles and cultural identity through leisure. Unlike prior studies focused narrowly on either traditional or Soviet periods, this work bridges historical eras and foregrounds the evolution of women's leisure alongside men's, offering new insights into cultural continuity, gender dynamics, and national identity formation in Kazakhstan.

2 Materials and Methods

This study employs a historical and cultural approach with elements of comparative analysis, focusing on the evolution of leisure practices in Kazakhstan from the eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The timeframe allows for a comprehensive analysis of how cultural practices of recreation evolved over several eras, encompassing key historical, social, and political transformations. The study draws on a range of historical, ethnographic, and cartographic sources. Specific archives consulted include the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the State Archive of Scientific and Technical Documentation, which hold relevant historical records. These archives provided documents, including official records, reports from colonial administrators, and sociological surveys from the Soviet period, which shed light on the structure of leisure practices in Kazakhstan during the respective periods. Ethnographic data from 20th-century field studies were pivotal in understanding the symbolism of leisure activities. These sources included oral histories, ethnographic notes, and participant observations. These materials allowed for an exploration of how leisure practices functioned as vehicles for expressing cultural values, gender roles, and social hierarchies within Kazakh society. The ethnographic studies also highlighted how these practices were modified or displaced during Soviet modernization efforts.

The methodology of this study combines comparative-historical, ethnographic, and cultural analysis. The comparative-historical method was used to examine how leisure activities evolved through key political events such as Russian colonisation, Soviet collectivisation, and the post-independence era. This approach highlighted continuities and shifts in leisure practices across different times. Ethnographic analysis focused on understanding the symbolism and cultural significance of leisure activities, with particular emphasis on gendered rituals and family-orientated leisure practices. The study also applied a cultural studies approach

Table 1: Social structure of Kazakh zhuzes

Elements of social structure	Characteristic	Role in society	Peculiarities
Zhuzes (Senior, Middle, Junior)	Three large communities based on blood and territorial ties.	Coordination of the internal life of society, protection of the territory from external threats.	Each zhuz specialised in a specific area, such as trade, cattle breeding, or military functions.
Auls (tribal communities)	Small social and economic units consisting of several families united by kinship.	Conducting economic activities, ensuring self-sufficiency in the community.	They led a nomadic lifestyle, shared pastures, and provided mutual support to their families.
Aksakals (elders)	Respected members of the community who decided key issues in domestic and foreign policy.	Reconciliation of disputes, management of the economy, leadership of defence.	Authority was determined by age, experience, knowledge of traditions, achievements in protecting the family.
Batyr	Military leaders who had distinguished themselves in battles and defence of their native lands.	Protection of the community, participation in military campaigns, protection from raids.	Important roles in strengthening the authority of the Zhuzes and making decisions on defence issues.

Notes. Source: Berdyguzhin et al. (2020).

to interpret how leisure activities were linked to the formation of cultural identity, particularly in response to state-imposed cultural changes during the Soviet era.

The study further employs genealogical, sociocultural, and linguistic methods to deepen the analysis. The genealogical method traced changes in tribal organisation and kinship structures, revealing how these social systems influenced leisure practices. Sociocultural analysis examined the evolution of family relations, rituals, and symbolic customs, exploring how these daily practices were intertwined with leisure activities. Linguistic analysis focused on language shifts, particularly the loss of traditional vocabulary associated with leisure, to explore the cultural transformations resulting from Soviet and post-Soviet policies. Together, these methods offer a comprehensive understanding of how leisure practices in Kazakhstan reflect broader socio-political changes and cultural identity formation.

3 Results

3.1 Kazakh society in the 18th – 20th centuries

In the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, Kazakh society went through socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations caused by both internal processes and the influence of external powers. A special social structure and distribution of responsibilities between men and women had been formed under the conditions of nomadic life, which together formed the basis for the sustainable existence of Kazakh society. In the 18th century, Kazakh society existed in the form of three major tribal divisions, or zhuzes (junior, middle, and senior), each of which was linked by blood and territorial ties (Table 1). The zhuzes included separate clan communities (auls), which were units of social and economic organisation. Management in the aul was organised around elders, aksakals, who decided important internal and external issues. The clan's hierarchy was based on seniority and merit in protecting it, sometimes in battles.

Nomadic livestock breeding (horses, camels, sheep, and cows) formed the basis of economic activity. Sheep breeding was particularly important, as sheep provided not only food but also wool for clothing. Horses played an important role in locomotion and warfare, as well as in symbolising wealth and social status. Kazakhs were skilled horsemen and nomads, expertly organising migrations between summer and winter pastures. Men in Kazakh society were traditionally engaged in herding and hunting and played a central role in providing security for the community, but in times of protracted warfare, women were also

trained in horsemanship and took part in battles. They took part in military campaigns to defend their lands from raids and engaged in inter-clan conflicts. Warfare and the ability to fight on horseback were considered important qualities for a man. Men were also engaged in judicial proceedings, participated in social life, and solved foreign policy issues, making Kazakhs active participants in the political processes of Central Asia (Abdakomov, 1997).

Women were crucial in managing the household and nurturing children. Cooking, processing wool, making clothes, sewing, and other crafts supported the stability and autonomy of auls. Women were also engaged in milk processing (production of koumiss and butter) and feltmaking, which required knowledge and skills passed from generation to generation.

The Russian Empire began actively developing Kazakh territories at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1822, the Statute of the Siberian Kirghiz (Kazakhs) was introduced, which effectively abolished the authority of khans in the Middle Zhuz (Holdsworth, 1952). The Russian Empire gradually strengthened its control over the Kazakh steppes by dividing them into administrative units, which reduced the influence of tribal ties. Russian officials and military officers, who often interfered in local affairs, became important. Russian colonisation led to changes in the economy. Taxes were introduced, sedentarisation increased, and the traditional nomadic system began to break down. New forms of economy, such as farming, emerged, which changed the nomadic way of life. Settlements and towns began to appear, and some Kazakhs were forced to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. Men who had previously been pastoralists were now forced to work on farmland or engage in trade, especially those living near cities. Women also experienced changes in their everyday lives. A sedentary lifestyle meant a change in craft activities: felting and wool gave way to the production of textiles and products necessary for a settled life. The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of Kazakh women scientists and writers, a consequence of the influence of Russian culture and education, which opened up new opportunities for women.

With the advent of Soviet power in the early twentieth century, Kazakh society underwent another fundamental change. The collectivisation policy implemented in the 1930s meant the forced removal of livestock and forced sedentarisation. Most nomads were forced to join collective farms, accompanied by mass repression and famine, which led to the death of a large part of the population. Soviet power also destroyed the old system of social hierarchy by proclaiming equality. This changed the position of women, expanding their rights and involving them in social production. Women began to participate actively in collective farms, working on an equal footing with men (Didenko, 2022). For the first time in the history of Kazakh society, women began to receive education, becoming teachers, doctors, and labourers. Vocational schools emerged alongside the propaganda of women's social emancipation, offering women opportunities to advance in new fields. Men who in pre-revolutionary times had been cattle herders became part of the working class. Many men went to work in factories, mines and industries, as industrialisation and urbanisation were among the main thrusts of the Soviet economy. The Soviet government, while introducing universal education, also actively involved men in education to train a new generation of specialists.

When Kazakhstan gained independence after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the process of revitalising national culture and restoring lost traditions could begin. During the years of independence, Kazakh society began to revitalise former social institutions such as aitys (poetry competitions), develop the Kazakh language, and study folk art. Interest in history and traditional culture began to grow, which in turn affected everyday life. Economic reforms led many to return to traditional economic activities, including herding and agriculture. Men became entrepreneurs, and women became active in various sectors of the economy, including management and science (Tiberghien & Lennon, 2019). In the 21st century, Kazakh society retains many aspects of traditional culture while combining them with the achievements of modern civilisation.

3.2 Leisure culture of Kazakh men in the 18th – 21st centuries

In the eighteenth century, the leisure culture of Kazakh men was closely linked to their nomadic lifestyle, which emphasised physical endurance, horseback riding, and adaptation to harsh environments. Daily activities involved herding, hunting, and guarding livestock, leaving little time for recreation in the modern

sense. However, Kazakh men incorporated physical and social activities into their lives to strengthen bonds and develop skills. A popular form of recreation was horseback wrestling, or *audaryspak*, where men competed to drag each other off a horse. Ground wrestling, or *kures*, was another popular activity, symbolising masculinity, fortitude, and strength. During this period, traditional competitions such as wrestling, horse racing, and archery were integral to their cultural practices. These events were often organised during seasonal gatherings, marking significant occasions such as spring's arrival or the harvest period. While specific frequencies are not documented, the recurrence of these activities was closely tied to the nomadic calendar and communal needs.

Physically demanding activities held cultural significance and were common in traditional societies. However, in contemporary times, engagement in these traditional recreational forms has become more symbolic and institutionalised, frequently restricting it to organised festivals and rural locales. A minuscule minority of Kazakh men currently participate in traditional sports such as falconry or horseback wrestling. These traditions are frequently endorsed by government-funded cultural efforts rather than reflecting common daily activity.

In metropolitan environments, leisure culture has undergone significant transformation. The majority of males now participate in sports mostly as spectators, especially via televised football and international events. Although national sports like *buzkashi* and falconry are heralded as emblems of heritage, genuine participation is limited and increasingly restricted to aficionados or certain cultural occasions. Simultaneously, sedentary recreational activities, like extended screen time and digital media engagement, have gained popularity, particularly among adolescents. These tendencies reflect global trends and are linked to increasing health issues, such as obesity and diminished physical activity levels.

Although traditional sports play a significant symbolic role in shaping national identity, their integration into daily life remains limited. Contemporary Kazakhstan faces the difficulty of integrating its symbolic legacy with accessible, inclusive, and health-enhancing recreational activities that meet the requirements of modern urban living.

Nomadic women also followed the wrestling tradition, regularly organising matches to foster masculinity and physical fitness. Sometimes a man and a woman fought in Kazakh wrestling. The contest between Bayrak and Banu-Sheshek described in the book "Korkyt Ata" is a perfect example of such rare situations. A strange maiden, who met a young warrior who was looking for the beautiful daughter of Baybidjan, introduced herself as Banu-Sheshek's maid and said that she would not introduce him to her mistress until he fulfilled the conditions of the competition with her. In the competitions of riding, shooting and wrestling, the young warrior is victorious and finally meets his Banu. This young girl, disguised as a maid, turns out to be Banu Sheshek herself. Practically all mass cultural events (fairs, dinners, weddings, seasonal festivals such as New Year's Eve, etc.) were not without wrestling. At the *Kymyzmuryndyk* holiday, women were the first to taste *koumiss*. The peculiarity of this event is the organisation of women's wrestling, with the main condition of the competition being the participation of women only: the participation of young girls is strictly forbidden. Women started the wrestling by tying a long cloth around their waist at the bottom of the *kimeshek* (Toktabai, 2004).

Cultural gatherings were an integral part of Kazakh recreation and often included equestrian games, a central element of Kazakh identity. *Buzkashi* (goat pulling), where men competed on horseback to carry a goat carcass to a specified point, was one of the main types of games. Such games were more than just entertainment: they demonstrated the riding skills, physical strength and tactical prowess of the participants, which were necessary for survival in a nomadic society. Cultural festivals also included poetry performances and storytelling, where *akyns* (poets) shared stories of heroism and history, helping to pass on traditions and strengthen community ties (Akyildiz, 2022).

Hunting, especially using birds of prey, was a prestigious occupation among Kazakh men and remains so to this day. Falconry, especially hunting with golden eagles, required patience, skill, and training. It was seen as both a pastime and a rite of passage for young men, symbolising their readiness to contribute to the life of the tribe. In addition to being a source of food and clothing, hunting served as a rallying point, as men often hunted in groups, strengthening ties within their community.

By the nineteenth century, Russian influence began to penetrate Kazakh society, leading to changes

in lifestyle and recreation. Under Russian colonial rule, traditional Kazakh customs began to intersect with new social and economic factors, changing the leisure activities of Kazakh men. The influx of Russian settlers and administration led to more structured farming, reducing the need for constant migration and changing the pace of life. Although many Kazakhs retained their nomadic lifestyle, some adapted it by incorporating agricultural work, which somewhat reduced the emphasis on traditional recreational activities such as horseback riding and hunting. The Koyandy Fair, which began in 1848 and continued until 1930, was a notable event during this period (Temirgalieva, 2003). Held annually in the Karkaraly region, the fair attracted participants from various regions, including Kazakhstan, Siberia, Central Asia, and western China. By 1900, the fair had expanded significantly, encompassing 276 shops and 707 yurts over an area of 55 km². Each year, the fair sold over 200,000 livestock, including horses, cows, sheep, and goats, demonstrating a high level of engagement and participation. The fair also featured cultural activities, including wrestling matches and performances by akyns (poets), highlighting the integration of traditional competitions into larger communal events.

The Russian military presence introduced new recreational elements into Kazakh culture, especially among men who enlisted or interacted with soldiers. The emphasis on military exercises and training gave Kazakh men new forms of physical activity and new leisure activities, such as wrestling. Traditional Kazakh wrestling and equestrian games, however, remained popular, reflecting the resilience of Kazakh cultural identity in the face of growing external influences.

With the establishment of the Soviet Union, Kazakh recreational practices underwent significant changes. Nomadic lifestyles were discouraged, and the Soviet state promoted a collectivised, agricultural society. This shift affected men's recreation: Sports and physical education were encouraged by the state as a means of fostering loyalty and physical fitness. The state rejected traditional games and introduced Soviet-style sports like football and boxing into organised community settings. As part of state-sponsored leisure activities, Kazakh men were required to participate in activities that promoted Soviet values. During World War II and the post-war years, Kazakh men's leisure activities were shaped by the demands of Soviet society. Physical labour on construction sites and collective farms often replaced traditional leisure activities. Soviet ideology popularised organised sports like football, wrestling, and weightlifting, promoting them as a means to develop a 'strong Soviet man'. Villages and workplaces often held competitions, creating a new form of social bonding and recreation in a structured, controlled environment.

Since the 1960s, there has been a renewed interest in preserving traditional Kazakh culture, including recreational activities. Soviet policies allowed the revival of the Kazakh language, music and some traditional sports, although these were integrated with Soviet values. Equestrian wrestling and falconry re-emerged with the support of cultural institutions. Many men were involved in both Soviet-style sports clubs and traditional Kazakh games, reflecting a hybrid identity (Talinbayi et al., 2018). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought new freedom for Kazakh men to reconnect with their heritage. Traditional recreational activities, such as *audaryspak* and falconry, were celebrated and organised into national festivals. There was a revival of Kazakh customs, and men once again took part in traditional games, hunting, and storytelling. However, the economic hardship curtailed leisure activities, as many men prioritised survival and adjusted to the shifting economic conditions. The freedom to choose a style of leisure, whether traditional or modern, became an important part of the evolving Kazakh identity.

In the 21st century, recreation for Kazakh men has become a balance between traditional and modern lifestyles. National sports such as *kures* and *buzkashi* are increasingly emphasised, and tournaments are held to promote Kazakh heritage. Falconry and equestrian wrestling are becoming increasingly visible cultural symbols, supported by both the state and private organisations. At the same time, modern Kazakh men have utilised a wide range of recreational opportunities, from Western sports such as football and basketball to leisure activities such as hiking and fishing, combining Kazakhstan's natural landscape with recreational pursuits (Gallo, 2020). Quantitative data from the 2024 cultural statistics of Kazakhstan indicates a robust engagement in cultural and leisure activities. The number of events held by cultural and leisure organisations increased by 8.8% compared to the previous year, reflecting a growing interest in organised cultural activities. Additionally, attendance at cultural institutions saw significant rises, with zoos experiencing a 30.0% increase, concert organisations 12.1%, and cultural and leisure organisations 11.5%.

These figures suggest a high level of public involvement in cultural events, including traditional festivals and competitions (Bureau of National Statistics. . . , 2024a).

Urbanisation and globalisation have brought a variety of recreational activities beyond the traditional ones into the lives of Kazakh men. The emergence of gyms, sports clubs and social media has helped popularise fitness and bodybuilding among young men, while urban events and music festivals offer new recreational opportunities. While traditional Kazakh games are less common in urban areas, they still hold significance in rural areas and during national holidays. Modern Kazakh men have a wide range of leisure choices, reflecting a combination of global and local influences in contemporary society (Pelizzo & Knox, 2021).

From the eighteenth century to the early 2020s, Kazakh men's leisure culture has evolved from traditional nomadic practices driven by the need for survival to a modern society influenced by both local and global trends. Despite political and social changes from Russian colonisation to Soviet rule and independence, Kazakh men have retained a deep connection to traditional activities such as wrestling, falconry, and equestrianism, although these sports have adapted over time. In the twenty-first century, Kazakh men's leisure culture reflects both pride in national identity and openness to modern influences, balancing the old and the new, thus celebrating Kazakhstan's unique history and cultural diversity.

3.3 Culture of recreation of Kazakh women in the 18th – 21st centuries

In the 18th century, Kazakh women's lives were defined by their role in a nomadic, clan-based society where women managed households, cooked meals, practised crafts, and cared for children. Daily life required resilience and adaptability. Kazakh women's leisure activities were often intertwined with these tasks, combining work and socialising. Embroidery, weaving and felting — essential skills for the production of household items and clothing — were both practical and creative activities. Storytelling played an important role in the social life of Kazakh women. Women gathered to share stories, folktales and oral histories, which served both as recreational activities and as a means of transmitting cultural values. These gatherings allowed women to relax, exchange ideas, and strengthen community ties. Women often passed along songs, riddles, and proverbs, creating an oral tradition that preserved Kazakh heritage. These community gatherings, although informal, were central to Kazakh women's leisure culture, which promoted mutual support and cultural continuity. Kazakh women participated in traditional songs that accompanied holidays, festivals and daily work. The *dombra*, a two-stringed instrument, often accompanied the singing. Although men traditionally played instruments, women contributed through voice and dance, which were important for community gatherings (Peterson, 1999).

Festivals, especially those that celebrated seasonal changes and important life events, provided Kazakh women with opportunities for recreation and cultural expression. Women participated in holidays such as *Nauryz* (Kazakh New Year), where they participated in the preparation of traditional foods and ceremonial duties. These events allowed them to break from their daily routine by participating in feasts, games, and dances. The festivals strengthened social bonds and allowed women to express their creativity and pride in cultural traditions, reflecting the communal nature of Kazakh recreation (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Utegaliyeva, 2020).

With the growing Russian presence, new social norms began to permeate Kazakh society. Russian education and Christianity introduced customs that influenced how Kazakh women spent their leisure time. While many women continued to engage in traditional activities, social practices such as tea parties and Russian-style celebrations began to emerge, particularly in urbanised areas. However, these new forms did not entirely displace pre-existing cultural practices shaped by Islam, which had long played a role in structuring everyday life and social interactions. For instance, Islamic religious holidays such as *Eid al-Fitr* (*Oraza Ait*) and *Eid al-Adha* (*Qurban Ait*) remained significant communal events, during which women participated in preparatory activities, communal cooking, and hospitality. These events served not only religious functions but also provided women with opportunities for socialising, storytelling, and reaffirming communal bonds. Thus, the leisure culture of Kazakh women during this transitional period reflected a

synthesis of influences, where Islamic traditions coexisted with emerging Russian customs, illustrating the layered and dynamic nature of cultural adaptation.

Russian colonisation facilitated educational reforms, resulting in the first school for Kazakh girls in the late nineteenth century (Aldashev & Guirkingner, 2017). Education provided new opportunities for recreation and personal development as girls and young women began to read, write, and share cultural values. For those who attended school, leisure activities expanded to include literary and artistic pursuits encouraged by Russian education. Although formal education was still rare in rural areas, its spread led to an important increase in Kazakh women's leisure opportunities, allowing them to engage in intellectual activities and socialise outside the home (Roy et al., 2023).

Kazakh women's leisure activities changed during the early Soviet period, as Soviet policies promoted collectivisation and discouraged traditional practices. The Soviets encouraged women's participation in community organisations, introducing new forms of recreation consistent with Soviet values, such as sports clubs, community festivals, and literacy programmes. Traditional crafts and gatherings were discouraged, and collective farms and communal labour projects created new spaces for women to socialise. The Soviet programme aimed to create a "new Soviet woman", and recreation became a means of promoting state values and collective identity.

The Soviet women's sports policy introduced structured recreation, which had previously been a rarity in Kazakh society. Kazakh women participated in organised sports, such as gymnastics, athletics, and group exercise, which were encouraged by the state to build physical strength and community spirit. Women's involvement in sport was encouraged as part of the Soviet ideology of equality and collectivism. While traditional leisure activities were restricted, Soviet sports programmes created new recreational opportunities, especially among young Kazakh women in urban areas. In the later years of the Soviet Union, there was a renewed interest in preserving Kazakhstan's cultural heritage, and traditional leisure activities among women began to revive. Embroidery, weaving, and other crafts became popular again, and state-sponsored cultural centres promoted these arts. Women reintroduced traditional dance, music and storytelling, often during national festivals. This period saw a mix of Soviet and Kazakh leisure activities: traditional crafts and Soviet-style sports coexisted with each other. Many women combined modern work with a renewed interest in traditional arts, reflecting a hybrid cultural identity.

After Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, there was a renewed focus on Kazakh heritage, with particular attention paid to revitalising traditional customs and women's recreation. National pride and efforts to preserve culture led to the return of festivals and traditional crafts as the main forms of women's leisure activities. The freedom to follow Kazakh customs encouraged women to reconnect with their cultural roots, especially in rural areas. However, economic problems and changes in society have also affected women's lives, forcing them to balance traditional customs with the demands of a transitional economy.

In the twenty-first century, Kazakh women's leisure activities reflect a combination of heritage and modern influences. Traditional arts and crafts are popular, and many women are active in weaving, embroidery, and jewellery. At the same time, urbanisation and globalisation have introduced new forms of recreation, including fitness classes, cinemas, and online communities (Bureau of National Statistics. . . , 2024b). Today, women enjoy both modern amenities and the opportunity to participate in national heritage activities, reflecting the diversity of contemporary Kazakh society. Table 2 presents a comparison of men's and women's leisure activities across these periods.

For both men and women, there is a shift towards more active and varied leisure activities. In both cases, there is a growing interest in sports and tourism, and traditional games and festivals are being revived. Women, on the other hand, are increasingly involved in cultural life, and their role in social processes is expanding.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant transformations in the role of women in Kazakh society, particularly in relation to leisure practices. Traditional nomadic society closely tied women's leisure activities to family responsibilities and social functions, emphasising community and cultural continuity. This aligns

Table 2: Comparison of leisure activities in nomadic and sedentary cultures of Central Asia

Period	Men	Women
18 th century	Horse competitions (kokpar, audaryspak), hunting, wrestling, evening conversations in yurts.	Participation in rituals (Nauryz and weddings), handicrafts, raising children, passing on folklore.
19 th century	Hunting, competitions (baiga), men's gatherings, influence of Russian culture, evenings with dombra.	Raising children, handicrafts, participation in rituals, teaching girls how to run a household.
20 th century (Soviet period)	Sports (football, wrestling, tennis), clubs, cinema, chess, trips to the countryside.	Theatre, clubs, cinema, family walks, gardening, work in Soviet structures.
Post-Soviet period	Traditional and modern sports, fitness, fishing, participation in traditional festivals.	Fitness, participation in festivals, traditional handicrafts, family leisure.
Modern times	Sports (running, swimming, fitness), tourism, social networks, participation in competitions and marathons.	Cultural events, fitness and yoga, tourism, social networks.
Common features and trends	Transition to sports and tourism, revival of traditional games and festivals, development of sports and technology.	Self-development, participation in cultural life, expansion of the role of women in public life.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Kendirbay (1997), Mgonja (2020), Aden (2023), The culture of Kazakhstan in 18–20 centuries (2019).

with the findings of Morrison (2023), who argues that socio-economic changes, such as those resulting from World War I, led to shifts in women's roles and increased their participation in public life. However, in contrast to Morrison's focus on political activism, this study highlights the shift towards individualised leisure and the adoption of Western leisure models in the twentieth century, which reflect broader social and economic changes in Kazakhstan. The comparison with Teĭin (2024) further supports this interpretation, as both studies show how external factors, like Russian colonisation, reshaped gender roles. This study extends the analysis by examining how leisure culture served as a locus for these transformations.

The study also contributes to the broader literature on gender and social change in Central Asia. While Abildinova et al. (2023) explored the impact of digitalisation and the shift from offline to online leisure activities in post-pandemic Kazakhstan, this study offers a historical perspective on how gendered leisure practices have evolved over centuries. The shift from collective, family-based leisure to more individualised activities parallels Abildinova et al.'s findings on the commercialisation and privatisation of leisure; this study focuses on how gender roles were implicated in this transformation. The absence of religious practices in this analysis, in contrast to Abildinova et al., opens avenues for future research that could integrate religious influences on gendered leisure practices in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the impact of modernization on gender equality, as identified by Kan (2023), is consistent with this study's findings, where the increasing individuality in leisure practices mirrors changes in women's roles in both the family and society.

This study also challenges existing interpretations of colonial impacts on gender roles in Kazakhstan. Drawing on Teĭin's (2024) analysis of Russian colonialism's influence on traditional nomadic life, this research demonstrates how the transformation of leisure practices was not solely driven by external political forces but also by internal social dynamics, such as gendered expectations of leisure. The introduction of Western-style leisure further complicated traditional gender roles, offering new opportunities for women while also creating tensions with longstanding social norms. This study thus expands on Teĭin's work by considering not just the economic and political disruptions caused by colonialism, but also the cultural and gendered aspects of transformation. Zhao (2022) provides a similar comparison by analysing the role of migration in changing gender roles in Uzbekistan; however, this study contributes by focusing on how the historical trajectory of leisure practices over multiple periods — colonial, Soviet, and post-independence — affects both men and women in Kazakhstan, thereby offering a more comprehensive view of gendered experiences across time.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a more complex understanding of how cultural practices —

particularly leisure activities — are deeply embedded in social, economic, and gender transformations. It builds on existing research by contextualising changing gender roles within a historical framework that spans multiple political and social transitions. This long-term perspective highlights how leisure culture is both a reflection of and a site for negotiating shifts in gendered power dynamics in Kazakhstan. By situating leisure in the broader social and historical context of gendered change, this study makes an important contribution to the understanding of gender roles in Central Asia, offering a new lens through which to view the evolution of cultural practices over time.

5 Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrate significant changes in the leisure culture of Kazakh men at different historical stages. Traditional nomadic societies viewed leisure activities as functional and collective, closely linked to daily life and economic activities. Activities such as wrestling, equestrian competitions and hunting have important social and educational functions. The Soviet authorities actively introduced standardised forms of leisure activities oriented towards socialist ideology. Mass physical culture events, sports sections and festivals have become an integral part of social life. Since the late 20th century and well into the early 21st century, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and globalisation, there has been a revival of interest in traditional sports and recreation. The study found that, despite the influence of Western culture and global trends, Kazakh men remain committed to their historical traditions in sports and leisure, which emphasises the importance of cultural heritage in shaping national identity.

Recommendations for future research include developing state support to preserve traditional leisure activities and integrating them into education to strengthen cultural heritage. Further exploration is needed to understand the impact of digital platforms and new leisure forms on health and social relationships. Limitations of the study include a lack of primary sources from the 18th and 19th centuries, making it difficult to fully capture the nuances of leisure culture during those periods. Additionally, the study's focus on Soviet and colonial periods requires cautious interpretation due to potential political bias, and the lack of gender-focused research limits a comprehensive analysis of leisure practices across genders in Central Asia.

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