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Aitys as a Cultural Phenomenon: Historical Development and Contemporary Significance for Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Aitys is a traditional Kazakh genre of improvisational oral poetry, often performed as a poetic contest or duel between two akyns (folk poets) accompanied by the dombra. This article examines the historical development and transformation of aitys through a postcolonial lens. Originally, aitys served as a vital medium for expressing collective values, identity, and social opinion in Kazakh society. Under Russian imperial and later Soviet rule, the genre was appropriated and repurposed as a tool of colonial and ideological propaganda, triggering contradictory processes of cultural preservation and change. Drawing on postcolonial theory—particularly Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and Frantz Fanon’s ideas on cultural reappropriation—the study analyzes how aitys functioned both as an instrument of colonial influence and as a platform for counter-discourse and cultural resilience. A diachronic comparison across different periods demonstrates that, despite significant external interference, aitys maintained its core significance and adaptability. In the post-Soviet era, aitys has experienced a revival as part of decolonization and cultural renewal in Kazakhstan, even expanding onto digital platforms. This research contributes a novel perspective by treating aitys not as a static folklore relic but as a dynamic cultural phenomenon. The findings highlight how aitys continues to shape Kazakh cultural identity and serve as a form of cultural resistance in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Aitys Genre; Postcolonial Theory; Cultural Appropriation; National Identity; Decolonization; Cultural Reappro-

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priation; Kazakh Oral Traditions; Poetics; Mashkhur Zhussip

1. Introduction

The onset of Russian expansion into the territories of Kazakhstan dates back to the 17th century when Russia sought to control strategically important trade routes and secure its southern border. This process gradually led to the full annexation of Kazakh lands and the establishment of administrative control, accompanied by cultural transformation and changes in the educational and public spheres. One of the key aspects of this transformation was the interference in traditional cultural institutions, such as aitys, an indigenous Kazakh genre of improvisational poetry. Aitys is an indigenous Kazakh genre of improvisational oral poetry, typically performed as a contest between two akyns (poet-performers) with *dombra* (lute) accompaniment.

Aitys, as one of the central forms of Kazakh oral culture, played a significant role in public life, serving as a medium for expressing national identity and social protest. Under Russian and later Soviet rule, aitys underwent changes and instrumentalization, turning into a means of cultural appropriation. This process can be examined within the framework of postcolonial theory, where the genre of aitys becomes a symbol of resistance to colonial and Soviet cultural dominance.

This article aims to investigate the role of aitys in the context of Russian and Soviet cultural policy, its transformation into an instrument of state propaganda, and its significance in contemporary postcolonial Kazakhstan as a symbol of the restoration of cultural autonomy.

The novelty of this study lies in reviewing the aitys genre from a historical perspective within the framework of postcolonial studies. This approach allows us to consider aitys not only as a piece of cultural heritage but also as a dynamic phenomenon that reflects the processes of cultural appropriation, transformation, and the restoration of national identity. Unlike the traditional perception of aitys as purely a folkloric genre, this research emphasizes its role as a counter-discourse operating under the conditions of colonial and postcolonial domination, as well as its influence on the formation of modern Kazakhstani cultural space.

The relevance of this work is determined by the neces-

sity of rethinking the cultural processes that took place in Kazakhstan during the colonial and Soviet periods through the prism of postcolonial critique. In the context of globalization and the revival of national cultural forms, the study of aitys as not only a cultural but also a political instrument of resistance and cultural reappropriation takes on particular significance.

2. Materials and Methods

The historical-cultural analysis is aimed at investigating the evolution of the aitys genre in various historical contexts, from the pre-revolutionary period to post-Soviet Kazakhstan. This approach allows for the identification of the influence of socio-political changes, administrative reforms, and the cultural policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union on the transformation of aitys, its role, and its functions in public life. Attention is given to the specific ways in which the genre was altered under the influence of ideological processes, as well as to its revival in the post-Soviet era.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on postcolonial studies, employing two key postcolonial theories: Orientalism—a concept developed by Edward Said^[1] for analyzing how the West constructs and disseminates stereotypical images of the East, portraying it as “The Other”—exotic, primitive, and backward. Said argues that these images are utilized in colonial discourse to justify dominance and control over Eastern peoples. Orientalism establishes the cultural superiority of the West through texts, art, and politics, defining and solidifying images that serve to uphold the “West-East” hierarchy.

Frantz Fanon^[2], in his works on decolonization, focuses on cultural reappropriation, which entails the process of returning cultural values, traditions, and identity to colonized peoples who had lost or had their cultural heritage distorted under colonial rule. Cultural reappropriation not only involves the restoration of national culture but also its adaptation to new conditions following the colonial period. Fanon’s methodology is grounded in the study of the psychosocial and cultural aspects of colonialism, as well as in analyzing how decolonized societies recover their identity

through language, art, literature, and customs that were previously appropriated or suppressed by colonial power.

From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, modern aitys can be analyzed as an embodiment of Homi Bhabha's^[3] concept of "cultural hybridity." According to Bhabha, colonized societies often develop hybrid cultural forms that integrate elements of indigenous culture with colonial influences to assert their identity subtly and powerfully. Similarly, contemporary aitys performances often reflect such hybridity by juxtaposing historical Kazakh narratives with modern socio-political issues, thus articulating a distinct Kazakh identity through poetic improvisation in a postcolonial context. Additionally, Spivak's^[4] notion of the "subaltern voice" can help to illuminate the role of contemporary akyns, who often voice concerns of marginalized communities or critique official narratives, thus positioning aitys as a platform for subaltern agency and public discourse in independent Kazakhstan.

Basing our analysis on these frameworks, we interpret the history of aitys through the colonial and postcolonial periods as a progression from imposed Orientalist narratives to a gradual cultural reappropriation by the Kazakh people. In other words, the transformation of aitys provides a clear case study of how colonial powers attempted to reshape an indigenous art form and how the Kazakh community eventually reclaimed it as a symbol of national identity.

3. Results and Discussion

The beginning of Russian expansion into Kazakh territories dates back to the 17th century when Russia started to establish its trade and military posts along the Ural River, seeking to control crucial trade routes and secure its southern borders. Gradually, through treaties of protectorate with Kazakh khans and military campaigns, the empire expanded its influence over Kazakh lands, culminating in the mid-19th century with the complete annexation of these territories and the establishment of administrative control. During this period, cultural intervention was more indirect: the Kazakh elite retained their positions, and traditional institutions, such as aitys and the system of biys, continued to play important roles in public life.

The situation changed after the administrative reforms of 1867–1868, when the Kazakh steppe was divided into

regions and districts, undermining the traditional system of governance and the preparation of new leaders. At the same time, the system of Russian-Kazakh schools began to develop, where education was conducted in Russian. Although they provided access to modern education, they also contributed to the displacement of the Kazakh language and culture from the educational and public spheres. A new elite was being formed, oriented towards Russian cultural and political values, gradually undermining the role of traditional cultural institutions.

By the early 20th century, amid growing national consciousness, the Kazakh intelligentsia became aware of the threat of cultural assimilation. During this period, despite resistance, Russification continued, and the Kazakh language and traditional forms of culture were increasingly perceived as obstacles to modernization. Kazakh-language newspapers and journals became important centers of intellectual resistance, where issues of national identity and cultural preservation were discussed.

With the establishment of Soviet power in the 1920s, a radical transformation of the cultural landscape began. The Soviet government viewed traditional cultural forms as obstacles to socialist modernization, leading to severe measures aimed at the "renewal" of Kazakh society. The introduction of the Latin alphabet instead of the Arabic script in 1929 and the subsequent transition to Cyrillic in 1940 were intended to break with the Islamic and cultural heritage of the past. These changes were accompanied by intense propaganda promoting new Soviet values and ideology, which were to replace traditional worldviews and social structures.

Collectivization in the 1930s proved catastrophic for the Kazakhs. The forced relocation of nomads into collective farms destroyed their traditional way of life, and the mass famine of 1932–1933, caused by food requisitions and the extermination of livestock, led to the deaths of approximately 1.5 million people, representing nearly a third of the Kazakh population. This period also marked a time of severe repression against the Kazakh intelligentsia, many of whom were accused of nationalism and executed. Notably, such cultural repression was not limited to Kazakhstan; during the same era in Ukraine, the Soviet regime harshly suppressed the kobzar tradition of itinerant bards, with many folk singers arrested or executed under accusations of "bourgeois nationalism."

In the post-war years, Kazakhstan became a destination for mass deportations of ethnic Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, and other peoples who were forcibly relocated to the republic. These deportations altered the demographic landscape, and by 1959, Kazakhs constituted only about 30% of the population. This period was also marked by active Russification, as the Russian language and culture came to dominate educational and cultural spheres. Industrialization and the Virgin Lands campaign brought a massive influx of Russian-speaking settlers, further intensifying cultural pressure on the Kazakh population.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Russification reached its peak. The strengthening of administrative control over the cultural sphere became an everyday reality. During this time, the Kazakh intelligentsia, despite the risks, sought to preserve national culture and language, advocating for their revival and development.

The period following independence in 1991 was marked by a return to national identity and a reassessment of the past. However, the cultural and linguistic consequences of decades of pressure persist: the Russian language continues to play a significant role in public and private life, and questions of cultural identity remain pressing for Kazakh society.

Despite the incomplete applicability of Edward Said's theoretical framework to post-Soviet spaces (the structure of relations between Russia and its colonies does not fully correspond to the binary opposition of "West-East" on which Said's theory is based; unlike classical colonial situations, where the colonizer and the colonized represented clearly demarcated cultural and geopolitical spaces, in the case of Russia and its southern territories, a more complex system of cultural and ethnic interrelations was at play), it is impossible to deny that the dynamics of power were on the side of Tsarist Russia, and later, the Soviet Union, with the center of power located in Russia. As researcher Madina Tlostanova observes, "The Socialist experience cannot be taken exclusively to ideology the same way as it cannot be limited by colonialism. It existed at their intersection leading to the creation of a model which—after the collapse of Socialism—turned out to be colonial as a whole, in relation to the winning neoliberal modernity/coloniality, yet retaining traces of its own internal imperial-colonial structures"^[4]. Therefore, it seems pertinent to us to examine the process of

cultural colonization using the example of aitys, an indigenous Kazakh genre.

Aitys is one of the genres of indigenous Kazakh oral creativity, alongside other genres such as epics (zhyr, dastan), lyric songs (zhyrlar), aitys, terme, proverbs and sayings (makal-matelder), fairy tales (ertegi), legends and myths (angyzdar), heroic songs (батырлар зжыр), and philosophical reflections (tolghau).

These forms are critically important for Kazakh society, as Gulbakyt Shashayeva notes: "In nomadic societies, with no room for urban art forms, such as sculpture or architecture, the relationship between location and identity is not established by means of monuments or buildings. Their conception of the changing space surrounding the community is embodied in forever vibrating and fleeting symbols like music, songs, poems and other oral forms of recollection"^[5].

The word "aitys" is derived from the verb "aitysu," which in Kazakh means "to argue," "to discuss," or "to compete in words." Aitys is a genre of oral improvisational poetry in which two akyns (folk poets) compete, creating poetic dialogues on topical issues. This contest includes elements of performativity, musical accompaniment (Kazakh dombra or Kyrgyz komuz), and rhetorical mastery. In ancient times, aitys performed social functions, taking place at public gatherings and reflecting the thoughts of the people through improvisational poetic duels between akyns. Improvisation was a key element of the genre, where the akyns responded to their opponents' performances in real time. In a ritual context, aitys often accompanied ceremonies, such as weddings, in the form of zhar-zhar, where akyns represented the sides of the groom and bride. Other forms included salt-aitys, in which akyns discussed customs and traditions, and badai-aitys, characterized by its humorous and playful nature. As an important tool for preserving oral traditions, aitys facilitated the transmission of historical and cultural knowledge. It also served as a platform for criticizing authority, allowing akyns to express the people's opinions.

Aitys performances traditionally take the form of poems, often using couplets and poetic rhyme. Improvisation lies at the core of aitys, and the akyns create their works in real time, adhering to strict rules of rhyme and meter. Depending on the specific form of aitys, different rhythmic patterns may be employed.

It is essential to note that the aitys genre reflects the very

essence of nomadic ontology with its dialogic nature, where every element (human, nature, culture) is constantly engaged in dialogue with others. Moreover, in nomadic society, interaction with other peoples required adaptive communication. As noted by E. M. Dubuisson in the analysis of the famous aitys: “Birzhan and Sara are able to “speak”—as poets, characters, and ancestors—to a changing series of audiences, all of whom become involved and implicated in their words and story as a result. They, like all akyns and the tradition itself, become a source of cultural authority”^[6]. The female perspective is vividly expressed by the aitys between Birzhan and Sara; this verbal duel between the poets reflects the clash of different worldviews: Birzhan, relying on authority and life experience, raises issues of social and family life, while Sara, representing the position of a young woman, defends her views on traditions, love, and equality.

Nomadism is associated with the constant need to adapt to changing environmental conditions and social challenges. Unlike their sedentary cultures, nomads live in conditions of perpetual transition and change. This shapes a particular way of thinking, in which adaptability and the ability to respond flexibly to change are of paramount importance.

This dialogical nature echoes the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival culture: aitys, like carnival, can temporarily suspend social hierarchies. Akyns, through humor, irony, and parody, critique or challenge existing political and cultural structures. This corresponds to Bakhtin’s concept of “carnival freedom,” where, during ritualized poetic play, social barriers are temporarily lifted, allowing participants to freely express their views. In aitys, laughter is not only directed at dismantling authority or providing a critical assessment of the social system but also at creating collective identity. It unites participants into a single community, allowing them to feel part of a cultural whole. From a structural analysis perspective, akyns in aitys use laughter not only as a reaction to external challenges (the opponent’s statements) but also as a means of destabilizing entrenched social and cultural meanings, offering alternative interpretations. In this context, laughter can be seen as a semiotic tool for deconstructing existing narratives.

Thus, aitys was not merely an artistic phenomenon but also a tool for transmitting cultural values and social experience. However, within the framework of postcolonial theory, aitys is not only a form of cultural expression but also

a counter-discourse aimed at resisting dominant narratives imposed by colonial power. Its content and form allow for the identification of hidden forms of resistance inherent in this genre (despite the fact that aitys was not always recorded in written form).

Esteemed poet Mashkhur Zhussip Kopeyev distinguished himself by utilizing this genre not merely as a form of artistic expression but as a potent tool for cultural transmission and social critique. One cannot overlook the influence of oral literature in leading Mashkhur Zhussip to poetry, which is conspicuously absent from any literary endeavor that strives to continue traditional forms. Specifically, the impact of oral literature on Mashkhur Zhussip’s formative poetic journey began with his early exposure to folk tales and continued with his writing in various poetic genres such as elegies, dedications, riddles, praises, and aitys. Furthermore, his role as a collector of folklore significantly enriched his literary works, adding depth and historical narratives that stand as high achievements on their own. Numerous studies and dissertations have validated his contributions as a folklorist, which in turn influenced the thematic and stylistic qualities of his aitys poems.

Mashkhur Zhussip adeptly reflected on all pressing issues of his time, societal injustices, and the everyday life of the Kazakh people in his works. His aitys poems particularly resonate with the societal discrepancies of the early twentieth century. These poems, reflecting on societal flaws and injustices, serve as a historical mirror to the period’s challenges.

In the context of postcolonial theory, his aitys transcends its traditional role, evolving into a counter-discourse that challenges and resists the dominant narratives enforced by colonial powers. This genre cleverly reveals subtle forms of resistance embedded within its content and structure, often through allegorical dialogues with non-human entities, reflecting on broader themes of life, justice, and cultural identity.

For instance, in the aitys “Mashkhur Zhussip’s aitys with the Swan,” there is a dialogue between the poet Mashkhur Zhussip and a crane, which serves as a symbol for reflecting on life, loss, wisdom, and fate. Dialogues with animals are a characteristic technique in Zhussip’s aitys. The crane returns after its autumn migration and recounts its journey, during which its role as leader of the flock was lost, and

its place was taken by a swan. In the dialogue, the poet asks the crane philosophical questions about the meaning of its journey, what it has learned, and what lessons it has drawn from its experience.

The crane responds that it has become an outcast among the birds, although it has done nothing wrong, and its exile was unjust. The conversation touches on themes of injustice, fate, and a return to roots. Despite its loss of status, the crane continues on its path, insisting that its mission is not yet complete. It also reminds the poet of the cyclical nature of life and the inevitability of change. Central to this exchange is the metaphor of the crane being replaced by the swan: “After appealing to the king like a Samruk bird, they left us and appointed the swan” (here and below, translation by the authors of the article)^[7]. Here, the theme of the displacement of traditional Kazakh values and their replacement by colonial, more “civilized” models according to colonial standards is clearly visible. The swan, as an alternative to the crane, embodies the idealized image introduced by colonial authorities as a standard, while the crane represents the marginalized tradition, stripped of its legitimacy in the new colonial order.

In another of his aitys, “Mashkhur Zhussip’s aitys with the bay horse,” the horse, with whom the dialogue is conducted, serves as a metaphor for the oppressed people whose freedom and dignity were lost under the yoke of colonial authorities. It is exhausted and depleted, symbolizing exploitation and constant use for the benefit of others, reflecting the experience of colonized people subjected to economic and cultural oppression. The horse, once a symbol of strength and freedom, is now turned into an object of exploitation. This dehumanization and the transformation of a free being into a tool underscore the cruelty of the colonial regime.

Another example is the famous aitys in riddles between Kerdari Abubakir and Alim Qozhakhmet, which reflects the impact of Tsarist administration on the Kazakh people. Abubakir describes how Russian colonial policies affected Kazakh lands, mentioning cities built by Russia along the Yedil (Volga) River, such as Orenburg, and discusses economic consequences, including cattle trade and tax collection. This aitys touches upon the theme of exploitation and control over Kazakh territories by the Tsarist government.

The particular value of such aitys lies precisely in their oral transmission—the non-fixed nature of aitys allowed akyns to avoid direct criticism of the authorities while still

conveying hidden meanings and subtle hints to the audience.

Secondly, aitys during the Soviet period was transformed from a traditional poetic practice into a tool of cultural policy, aimed at creating and legitimizing a new Soviet myth about the Kazakh people. In the 1930s and 1940s, as part of the project of “Soviet nationality,” aitys began to be used to affirm the image of the “new Kazakh”—socialist-oriented, collectivist, and loyal to communist ideals. Soviet ideologists actively integrated aitys into cultural policy by organizing large-scale poetic contests, where the themes and content were strictly controlled. Akyns were required to praise the successes of collectivization, industrialization, and the party, propagating ideas of class struggle and internationalism. This practice is an example of cultural appropriation and instrumentalization. Edward Said, in “Orientalism,” writes: “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West”^[1].

The Soviet government presented Zhambyl as a symbol of harmonious unity between Soviet power and the Kazakh people. During this period, his work was characterized by vivid epic imagery extolling the “new Soviet order,” and it became part of official cultural policy aimed at promoting socialist values. With active support from the authorities, Zhambyl became one of the most renowned and recognized akyns of Kazakhstan, and his image was used to create a new mythology of “Soviet Kazakhstan.” It is claimed that in 1934, party official Andrey Aldan-Semenov was sent to find a folk akyn who could serve as a symbol of Soviet Kazakhstan. Zhambyl was chosen as a poor and elderly man with many children, fitting this role. Subsequently, his “secretaries,” including young Kazakh poets like Abilda Tazhibaev, wrote poems in his name. For example, the poem “My Country,” published in “Pravda,” was created in this way and then translated into Russian. In the 1940s, Russian poet Mark Tarlovsky also participated in creating Zhambyl’s “work.” “It is an established fact that many of these songs were written in Russian by Zhambyl’s so-called ‘translators’ and published as translations.” Y.Kozitskaya also points to the methods of orientalizing the fictional text of aitys: “Replacing a Russian word with a Kazakh word understandable from the context was aimed at orientalizing the text. This technique emphasized the foreign nature of the work. <...>

Compiling commentary on the text served several purposes. First and foremost, it focused on details: the name of the aul, the age of the hero in the poem—which gave the text a greater degree of credibility”^[8]. However, it is important to note that in Zhambyl’s earlier, authentic works, created before the Soviet period, completely different themes can be observed—traditional Kazakh forms of poetry focused on epic, folk themes. Only in his later years did his work become politically oriented, indicating the strong influence of Soviet authority. (“O, Stalin, you are our great leader, You are our bright path, leading to happiness. We are proud of you, as our own son, You are forever in the hearts of the people”; “The kolkhoz is our home, our common labor, Let the land bloom with bread, And we, like brothers, will live, Strengthening the world with people’s friendship”^[9]).

This is a typical example of Said’s Orientalism, where colonizers take the cultural elements of colonized peoples and use them as tools for constructing desired narratives. In this case, aitys was severed from its roots as a form of free poetic improvisation and turned into a mouthpiece for ideology.

Thirdly, aitys in the context of post-Soviet decolonization serves the function of restoring cultural autonomy and language, acting as a mediator for rethinking the traumatic historical experience and creating a new discourse of identity. This can be interpreted as a process of cultural reappropriation, where the traditional form is used to assert its own subjectivity and revise imposed narratives. Speaking of the musical communities of aitys poets functioning in the 2000s, Dubuisson writes: “This network considers itself to be recreating a great Kazakh tradition which was suppressed under the Russo-hegemonic rule of the Soviet Union. In that sense, aitys is an interesting lens on postcolonial cultural production and the question of what ‘authentic culture’ might be and who is legitimated to recreate it today”^[10].

Thus, during the Soviet period, aitys simultaneously served as both a tool of state power and the voice of the people. The Soviet government adapted this genre to its needs—organizing celebratory aitys competitions that glorified socialism and elevating folk akyns to the status of ideological symbols^[11]. At the same time, the very nature of aitys as an improvisational contest of opinions allowed it to remain a channel for public self-expression. Even while being formally appropriated by the state, aitys did not lose its

fundamental function—to convey the people’s truth and preserve cultural continuity. This dual role meant that aitys survived an era of repression and censorship, transforming from a “folkloric showcase” of the Soviet state back into a genuinely popular genre as soon as the opportunity arose to speak openly on behalf of the people.

The works of some folk poets were consigned to oblivion during the Tsarist and Soviet periods: their names were not mentioned in educational institutions, including universities and schools, and their works were excluded from curricula. This was because, in 1907, Mashkhur Zhussip published his works, openly condemning the colonial policies carried out by the Russian Empire. In particular, he criticized the seizure of lands by Russian settlers and the exploitation of the local population. In addition, his work was associated with the promotion of Islam and religious dogmas, which contradicted the ideology of Soviet atheism: “The five pillars of Islam are five obligations, Hell has seven levels, but how many gardens of paradise? The Qur’an is the foundation of Islamic faith, Zhumeke, how many letters are there in this Qur’an?”^[12].

With independence, a process of restoring and rethinking cultural heritage is underway, in which the works of previously ignored folk poets are gaining new significance. Thus, this heritage is reappropriated—a process that Fanon regarded as necessary for the restoration of national identity. Such poets, for example, Mashkhur Zhussip Kopeyev, have become revered figures in modern Kazakh culture: he is called a prophet and a saint. Fake predictions attributed to the poet circulate on the internet (as fact-checking publications note: “Republican media (archive) and others spread this prediction in the form of a poem, attributed to Mashkhur Zhussip”^[13]). Pilgrimages are made to his relics. Dubuisson speaks of this in the context of another poet, Abai Kunanbaev: “Practices of shrine visitation, pilgrimage, ancestor worship, and Muslim tradition”^[14]. S. Kibalnik, in turn, analyzes how the figure of Zhambyl is remythologized, proclaiming his kinship with Nazarbayev, which determines the selection and interpretation of facts from the akyn’s life^[15]. In some ways, paradoxically, the mythologization of poets mirrors the legacy of Soviet cultural policy, where figures from the past were mythologized to create ideologically reinforced national symbols. In their study of the revival of cultural identity under the influence of the commercialization of eth-

nicity, culture can become a static object, commodified or turned into a fixed phenomenon, losing its dynamism and living connection with the community: “In the post-colonial era, the recuperation of ‘tradition’ under the impact of Ethnicity, Inc. may have the effect of reifying ‘culture’ as a thing in and of itself”^[16]. Kudaibergenova D. writes that historicity and continuity have become key elements of national ideology in independent Kazakhstan. However, the use of these concepts has raised more questions than answers for nation-builders^[17]. In a 2010 speech, the Minister of Culture of Kazakhstan remarked: “Modern aitys differs from those that were held earlier. The theme of today’s aitys is independence. Independence, like the dombra in your hands, has two singing strings. One string is the Kazakh people. The other is the head of state, who has made Kazakhstan famous around the world. Therefore, akyns today must speak about this. Today, we must praise Astana, which has made Kazakhstan famous globally, and talk about Kazakhstan’s achievements”^[18]. Moreover, patronage is widespread in contemporary aitys, as noted by E. M. Dubuisson, emphasizing how political figures and elites often sponsor these events^[14]. This patronage system shapes the content of performances, as aitys poets may either align with or subtly challenge political narratives depending on their relationship with their patrons.

At the same time, however, aitys is organically gaining popularity among youth in modern Kazakhstan, thanks to digitalization and new formats of performance. Online aitys and performances via social media give young poets the opportunity to showcase their talents to a wider audience. This attracts youth, as digital platforms offer them more freedom for self-expression and democratize access to the art of aitys, which was previously predominantly a live genre.

An example of online aitys can be seen in the contest between Ibrahim Altynbek and Karat Nurzat, released ahead of the 2019 presidential elections^[19]. On the topic of women’s role in politics, the aitys features a humorous discussion on whether women can hold the office of president. Nurzat begins by arguing that a woman’s rule may be unsuitable for the country, while Altynbek counters by mentioning the historical figure of Tomyris, the ancient Saka queen renowned for her wisdom and strength. The aitys garnered a large number of views. In recent years, aitys performances have addressed pressing issues faced by the Kazakh people, such as envi-

ronmental concerns or the lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic: “In the name of Allah, I will begin with firm and clear words. In difficult times, we stand with courage and steadfastness. Aitys in home confinement is a strange thing, yet your youth, Tolegen, may still be full of strength”^[20].

A national online aitys in April 2020 (dubbed the “AN-TIKOR Aitys”) ran for over three weeks, and the winner of each duel of words was determined by real-time audience votes. Viewers on Facebook and Instagram Live could watch and vote, effectively becoming part of the performance. The event culminated with finalists receiving substantial prizes (e.g., 400,000T for first place) and even symbolic gifts like an ethno-art installation and souvenirs with the #BizBirgemiz (“We are together”) slogan. Such examples show how digital platforms not only broadcast aitys to broader audiences but also allow interactive participation, transforming a traditionally face-to-face art into a networked social experience.

Beyond social media, new technologies are shaping aitys in creative ways. A notable innovation is the use of generative AI to simulate aitys performances. For instance, the “Aitys Battle” project (2023) employs a GPT-3.5 AI to generate improvised poetic duels between famous historical figures.

This experimental platform allows users to select two figures and a topic, then watch the AI produce a unique aitys exchange, complete with the rhythm and wit characteristic of real akyns. The aim is to showcase Kazakh cultural heritage interactively, engaging younger, tech-savvy audiences through a blend of tradition and high-tech. While AI-generated verses lack the human soul of true aitys, such projects highlight the genre’s adaptability – even algorithms are being taught to “speak” in the verse-duel format.

Interactivity is also on the rise. Some independent organizers have created online aitys clubs and competitions through messaging apps and websites. For example, a platform called Aitys Club encourages children under 18 to register online (via aitys.elumiti.kz) and participate in youth aitys contests, blending education with entertainment.

Meanwhile, enthusiasts share aitys clips on YouTube channels and even Telegram groups, ensuring the art form circulates in daily digital communication. These trends indicate that aitys is not only surviving in the digital age but actively evolving—from AI-assisted performances to grass-

roots online communities—thereby reaching global audiences and the Kazakhstani diaspora who can tune in from anywhere.

One of the recent studies on aitys in Kazakhstan is the work of Tleuberdina G., Tastemir Q.I., Batyrgalieva G.T., and Shakhmanova G.Sh., which focuses on the work of the renowned contemporary akyn Balghynbek Imashev^[21]. The article highlights key themes addressed by Imashev in his aitys performances and analyzes their social resonance. The authors examine whether aitys still fulfills its historical function as “the voice of the people” and how it has changed compared to previous decades. The researchers note that while maintaining continuity with traditional aitys, the modern genre is acquiring new characteristics, evolving in line with societal changes. In Imashev’s aitys performances over the past decades, his mastery of improvisation, rhythm, and artistic techniques is evident, demonstrating a high level of performance skill and active engagement with the audience. Thus, contemporary aitys exemplifies a balance between respect for tradition and innovation, allowing it to remain relevant and attract new generations of listeners.

The study by Saudbayev M., Bayimbetov B., and Karipov B. examines aitys as a form of folk journalism and a channel for social exchange^[22]. The authors argue that in traditional Kazakh society, aitys functioned as an informal mass media, ensuring the transmission of socially significant information between regions. The article demonstrates that aitys is not only a contest of oratory skills but also a medium for disseminating news, opinions, and social messages. This highlights the interactive nature of the genre, where the audience plays a crucial role in perceiving and interpreting the themes discussed in aitys.

Jennifer C. Post highlights the significance of aitys for cultural diasporas. The author examines the role of aitys at the Naadam festival in Mongolia as a form of expressing cultural identity and preserving tradition in the modern context^[23]. Salimjan Guldana also explores how aitys allows members of minority groups not only to participate in state projects but also to gain cultural significance and flexibility, transcending national and gender norms^[24].

Moreover, in 2015, UNESCO inscribed aitys on the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, underscoring its importance as a cultural phenomenon that strengthens national identity. This act of rehabilitating cultural heritage

contributes not only to the restoration of historically suppressed identity but also to the affirmation of multiple national narratives, which, despite colonial repression, have retained their uniqueness and cultural resistance.

With such recognition, an intriguing postcolonial tension arises: a cultural practice that was once considered local and peripheral has become a part of the global cultural field, which though problematic, transforms its meaning in the eyes of both national and international communities.

4. Discussion

As a result of studying the transformation of the aitys genre under Russian and Soviet colonization, as well as its re-appropriation in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, several key conclusions can be drawn that significantly expand our understanding of this phenomenon and its role in the cultural dynamics of the region.

First and foremost, aitys, despite its deeply traditional form, has proven to be a genre of high flexibility, capable of adapting and transforming in response to political and social changes. This process should not be viewed as a one-sided imposition of colonial or ideological power. Rather, aitys acts as a platform for the creative hybridization of identities, where elements of traditional Kazakh culture intertwine with new forms of collective self-expression, including socialist ideals and postcolonial aspirations for the restoration of cultural autonomy.

Aitys played a dual role in the interaction between power and society. On the one hand, as a genre of improvisational poetry, it provided opportunities for social protest and veiled criticism of power, allowing the population to engage in political dialogue even under strict ideological control. On the other hand, the Soviet authorities, adapting aitys to their needs, used it as a means of propaganda, turning the genre into a tool of cultural appropriation. However, this use of aitys cannot be viewed exclusively in terms of repressive control, as the genre not only retained its traditional elements but also opened up space for the development of a new Soviet Kazakh identity.

The post-Soviet stage of aitys’ development demonstrates the importance of the genre not only as a piece of cultural heritage but also as an active tool for rethinking national memory and identity. This can be seen as a continuation of

postcolonial resistance: postcolonial theory emphasizes the importance of decentralizing power and returning cultural traditions to the people, rather than appropriating them by elites to reinforce political narratives. The restoration of aitys as an essential element of cultural revival is linked to decolonization processes aimed at restoring cultural subjectivity. As Fanon notes: “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman’s agreement”^[2].

Thus, the aitys genre, despite its deep historical roots in traditional culture, demonstrates remarkable flexibility and adaptability while maintaining its role in shaping Kazakh identity and rethinking it in the context of globalization.

The study of aitys and other traditional forms of Kazakh art opens new perspectives for research from a postcolonial perspective. Furthermore, in the future, aitys can be analyzed from the standpoint of gender studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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