

**UNDERSTANDING TRADITIONS, ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN KAZAKHSTAN'S CULTURAL HEART, ALMATY****\*Susan Mya Çaksın, Nurlykhan Aljanova, Bilal Ahmad Malik**

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**Abstract**

Almaty (Alma-Ata) is the birth city of apples that the world rejoices. This paper explores Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, where many traditions and cultures overlapped for centuries reflecting its rich cultural heritage and contemporary aspirations. Pre 8<sup>th</sup> century nomadic culture impacted on yurt architecture, felt craftsmanship, horseback riding and oral storytelling. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century, Turkic and Islamic influences significantly shaped dome-shaped architecture, calligraphy, arabesque decor, bazaar culture, and molded religious practices and social norms. During the same period, Mongol culture also left a profound impact, notably influencing political and military systems through advancements in horsemanship and archery, promoting nomadic pastoralism, and establishing a distinct social hierarchy linked to clan relations. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Persian culture greatly influenced literary forms, poetry, calligraphy, textile and craft refinement, and Sufi mysticism. During this time, Chinese influence via the Silk Road also became prominent, affecting trade routes, tea consumption, and the art of papermaking. From the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Soviet Russian influence impacted on the Cyrillic script, introduced Soviet-style architecture, and influenced on Western socialist art movements. 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural Kazakh cultural resurgence is highly influenced by Al Farabi and Abay's philosophy and cultural appreciation. This research is grounded in a comprehensive content analysis of academic papers and books, supplemented by insights and contributions from professors of departments under Faculty of philosophy and political science of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The research was carried out within a one-year period, spanning from 2019 to 2020. This paper delves into how Almaty's urban fabric intertwines by analyzing key factors that has resulted in the city's cultural evolution and societal changes.

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage of Almaty, Architectural Evolution of Kazakhstan, Cross-Cultural Influences in Almaty.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Almaty, located in the crossroads of cultures, the city has rich natural and cultural heritage. As Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty serves as a vibrant confluence of traditions, cultures, and influences that have intertwined over centuries, painting a complex portrait of its identity. This paper embarks on an exploration of Almaty's extensive cultural landscape, tracing the city's evolution from its pre-8<sup>th</sup>-century nomadic beginnings through to its contemporary cultural resurgence. Through the lens of architecture, literature, social norms, and religious practices, we delve into how Almaty's urban and societal fabric were intertwined. Additionally, this investigation highlights the significant impact of renowned figures such as Al Farabi and Abay Kunanbayev, whose philosophical and cultural legacies continue to inspire the city's modern aspirations.

***Pre-8<sup>th</sup> century: Nomadic culture***

Pre 8<sup>th</sup> century nomadic culture that influenced on Kazakh people includes horseback riding, yurt architecture, storytelling and felt craftsmanship. The way that the world went to wars was altered dramatically by horseback riding, according to historians and archaeologists. It is less often mentioned that horseback riding's significant influence on pastoral economies and herding methods in the Central Asian steppes dated back to as early as 4500 BC.

<sup>1</sup>Yurts for Kazakhs has always been a symbolic identity of the nomadic ancestors. It is as a sign of resilience, identity and adaptability, a nomadic sanctuary or the home in motion.<sup>2</sup>The centuries-old oral history of the Kazakh people, passed down from generation to generation, is mostly preserved in storytelling (zhyr), which tells the story of the people's evolution into a cohesive nation. A range of legends and stories of tribes were passed down from grandparents to their offsprings for many generations.<sup>3</sup>Traditional felt décor of peculiar designs such as Pazyryk carpet can be traced back into pre 8<sup>th</sup> century central Asia.<sup>4</sup>

***8<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Turkic, Islamic, and Mongol Influences***

During 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century, Turkic Islamic and Mongol influences contributed in Kazakh society in terms of social norms, religion as well as architecture. According to Burkutbay Ayagan's analysis on spread of Islam within Kazakhstan around 8<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is said to have had great impacts on the Golden Horde and the Kazakh Khanate as well as many parts of Russia. But the anti-religious policy of the Soviet state was a challenge. The role of interfaith relations after the collapse of the USSR and the importance religious

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<sup>1</sup>D.W. Anthony and D.R. Brown, 'Horseback Riding and Bronze Age Pastoralism in the Eurasian Steppes', *University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>M. Eglyzbaeva and Meirmanova G., 'The Yurt and World View Features of the Kazakhs', 2017.

<sup>3</sup>M Onal and Zh Saltakova, 'The Historicity of Kazakh Genealogy Storytelling (Zhyr)', *Eurasian Journal of Philology: Science and Education*, 3.175 (2019).

<sup>4</sup>Gulnar Soltanbaeva Zhazira Zhukenova and Baikonir Izhonov, 'Traditional Felt in the Kazakhs Folk Art', *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 2016.

studies system in modern education is also discussed in his paper.<sup>5</sup> Due to the spread of Khojas in the Kazakh lands, two main waves in Islam were formed during that period namely Ahl ar-Rai and the Kaysaniya-Mubayidiya. They stood at the forefront of all scientific research in Islam of the era. These Islamic pioneers contributed greatly in shaping traditional culture of Turkic-Muslim groups and played a pivotal role of Kazakh history.<sup>6</sup> The Mongol influence did not alter Kazakh culture and identity much and Kazakhs in general largely retained their distinct Islamic identity. But Mongol influences can be traced in language, military practices, and political structures.<sup>7</sup> Due to nomadic lifestyle and influence of Islamic rulings as well as other doctrines such as Mongol Yassa Code, heritage and property law in Kazakhstan is unique.<sup>8</sup> Many buildings have been pillaged and torn down during Mongol invasions.<sup>9</sup> But some noteworthy masterworks are still there. Otrar Tobe is the architectural heritage from Achaemenian Empire.<sup>10</sup> The Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum built by Emperor Timur in honor of the Sufi saint was a masterwork of Timurid architecture. Many Persian and Turkic architectural elements can be observed in the Mausoleum.<sup>11</sup>

### 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Persian and Chinese Influences

During 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century, Persian and Chinese influences contributed in Kazakh society in terms of culture and trade. Literary forms, poetry, calligraphy, textile and craft refinement, and Sufi mysticism were also impacted during this period. Although Timur himself wasn't Persian, his empire promoted the spread of Persian influence in Central Asia. Despite most of Kazakhs remained as Sunni Muslims, the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Persia (1501-1736) also impacted Kazakh urban centers. Persian merchants played a significant role along the Silk Road. Intricate tileworks, geometric patterns, and calligraphy of Persians were inspired into some of Kazakh architecture. Many cultural influences were intertwined during this period due to Qing Dynasty's expansion into Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> Recent oppressions towards Muslim ethnic groups in western China are the results of communist movement's necessity to remove faith from society. However, China and Central Asia always have interdependent relationship for centuries. Kazakhs, Dungans and Uyghurs are from the most distinct groups participating in this relationship. Dungans are Chinese-speaking Muslims originated from China

and migrated to Central Asia.<sup>13</sup> Uyghurs are Turkic-speaking people who reside in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. They have a long history of being under Chinese, Mongol, and other dominions in addition to several independent Uyghur kingdoms. Kazakhs are the second major ethnic group of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Because of the coexistence in the region for centuries, these groups contribute each other rich cultural tapestry effecting in language, food and social customs.<sup>14,15</sup>

### 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Soviet Russian Influence

Karl Marx's famous line on his tombstone reads 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. According to Marx, luxury brands of Capitalist society exploit Commodity Fetishism by associating their products with exclusivity and status, despite being produced under often exploitative conditions. For him, Superstructure reflects the interests of the dominant class while the Base remained as Economic Foundation.<sup>16</sup> One of his main concerns was Alienation. Alienation and disconnection of sweatshop labor led to the feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and dissatisfaction which then lose the sense of belonging in community and family to end up losing self-identity. Both Marx and Engels never able to implement their theory during their lifetime. However, Vladimir Lenin's understanding of the need of Vanguardism positioned himself as a pivotal figure in implementing Marx's ideologies. Lenin led Bolsheviks to power in 1917 and Kazakhstan became a part of Soviet Union in 1920. The Soviet Russian's influence on Kazakhstan from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century profoundly reshaped the region's social, political, and economic landscape.<sup>17</sup> It has affected in art, architecture and Cyrillic script. During this period, Kazakhstan underwent significant changes, including industrialization, forced collectivization and cultural Russification. These policies were aimed for Kazakhstan to get integrated more into the Soviet State. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tsarist Policies, Russification, land dispossession, and settler migration increased under Soviet rule, leading to Kazakh uprisings like the Basmachi movement which ultimately lead to establishment of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920.<sup>18</sup> During Stalin era, Kazakh language and traditions were suppressed greatly. During World War II (Great Patriotic War), over 500,000 Kazakhs fought with the Soviet Union and played a crucial role in the Allied victory over Germans. The park '28 Panfilov Guardsmen' in Almaty was established to honor the heroism of 28 soldiers of the 316<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division who famously defended Moscow against German forces in 1941. Eternal Flame is lid for them until now

<sup>5</sup>Burkutbay Ayagan, 'Islam in Kazakhstan: History of Distribution and Modernity', *ISTORIYA*, 2021.

<sup>6</sup>Z. Zhandarbek and K. Karatyshkanova, 'The Role of the Kazakh Khojas in the History of the Kazakh People', *Turkology*, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Holly Barcus and Cynthia Werner, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia: Transnational Migration from 1990-2008', *Asian Ethnicity*, 11.2 (2010), 209-28 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631361003779463>>.

<sup>8</sup>Z. Utkelbayeva, 'Kazakh Inheritance Law and Its Difference from Other Legal Systems', *Al Farabi Kazakh National University Bulletin Journal*, 1.92 (2020).

<sup>9</sup>Timothy May, 'Mongol Genocides of the Thirteenth Century', in *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, 2023 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108655989.022>>.

<sup>10</sup>Enrico Fodde, 'Conserving Sites on the Central Asian Silk Roads: The Case of Otrar Tobe, Kazakhstan', *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 2006 <<https://doi.org/10.1179/175355206x202994>>.

<sup>11</sup>Yerlan ISSAKOV and others, 'Study of the Impact of Unesco Heritage Sites on Sustainable Tourism Development: A Case Study of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, Turkestan', *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 51.4 supplement (2023), 1717-27 <<https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.514spl12-1167>>.

<sup>12</sup>Liesbeth Geevers, 'Safavid Cousins on the Verge of Extinction: Dynastic Centralization in Central Asia and the Bahrami Collateral Line (1517-1593)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58.3 (2015), 293-326 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341376>>.

<sup>13</sup>Elisabeth Allès, 'The Chinese-Speaking Muslims (Dungans) of Central Asia: A Case of Multiple Identities in a Changing Context', *Asian Ethnicity*, 2005 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360500135716>>.

<sup>14</sup>Xiaoxu Zhu, 'Self-Acknowledgement at Sea—Identities of Xinjiang's Minority Groups', *American International Journal of Social Science*, 8.2 (2019), 96-101 <<https://doi.org/10.30845/aijss.v8n2p11>>.

<sup>15</sup>Atif Adnan and others, 'Phylogenetic Relationship and Genetic History of Central Asian Kazakhs Inferred from Y-Chromosome and Autosomal Variations', *Molecular Genetics and Genomics*, 2019.

<sup>16</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (International Publishers Co., 2014).

<sup>17</sup>Sevket Akyildiz and Richard Carlson, 'Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy', *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*, February, 2013, 1-210 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203761977>>.

<sup>18</sup>Mehmet Dervish Kılınçkaya and M Egamberdiyev, 'Some Aspects of Ethnographic Studies of the Russian Geographical Society in Kazakhstan in the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup>- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries', 2018 <<https://doi.org/10.26577/JH-2018-2-213>>.

in front of the memorial statue in Panfilov park. Kazakhstan was a key supplier of natural resources for the Soviet Union which led to environmental damages and economic dependence. The rise of Kazakh nationalism and advocacy for revival and greater autonomy led to independence in 1991.<sup>19</sup> Many art movements from Soviet Russia have impacted on Kazakhstan including the habit of frequenting theatres by upper and middle-class society in major Kazakh cities. Abay Kazakh State Opera and Ballet Theater is not only one of the oldest but also among the biggest and most significant cultural institutions in Kazakhstan. It is named after the great Kazakh theologian, poet and scholar Abay who was a cultural reformer. Theatres in Astana and Almaty today have fusion plays influenced both by Kazakh culture with Soviet artistic traditions.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Contemporary Kazakh Cultural Resurgence

Al Farabi (872-950 CE) and Abay (1845-1904) are considered pillars of Kazakh intellectual and cultural identity. **Al Farabi** (Alpharabius) was a philosopher and polymath who made significant contributions across various fields including philosophy, logic, music, and science. His work impacted not only on Central Asia but also towards Islamic philosophy. He was deeply influenced by Aristotle and sought to harmonize the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato. Al Farabi was often called the 'Second Teacher' after Aristotle. Aristotle's texts were not accessed by Christian theologians and the West until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Translation of Arabic Aristotelian texts were introduced into Latin much later by scholars like Gerard of Cremona and Averroes which influenced Thomas Aquinas and others. Al Farabi also contributed on science and cosmology. His study of universe, physics, and the classification of knowledge raised the bars of intellectual pursuit in many ways. Al Farabi researched and wrote extensively on music as well. According to him, it was an important part of education and a way to influence the soul and emotions. He believed in music's therapeutic effects and its ability to harmonize the inner states and emotional well-being of individuals. His work 'The Virtuous City' explored ideal societies based on wisdom and justice.<sup>20</sup> **Abay** is a seminal figure in Kazakh literature. He is known for his poetry, philosophical works, and efforts in promoting education and national identity among the Kazakhs. His poems, such as 'Zaman Aitys' (Song of Time) criticized social injustices and emphasized the importance of self-awareness and moral values. Abay's poetry and prose are celebrated for their introspective depth, moral introspection, and critique of societal norms. While promoting national identity and education, his work on philosophy and advocacy of education also impacted the Kazakh society. He advocated for learning Russian and European languages to access the broader world of knowledge, simultaneously urging the preservation and development of Kazakh cultural traditions and language. His philosophical work 'Words of Edification' reflect on themes of morality, wisdom, and the pursuit of a meaningful life. It provided insights into having the balance between modernity and tradition of Kazakh identity.<sup>21,22</sup> Currently, the Department

of Religious and Cultural Studies of Al-Farabi University has three main branches of studies. Cultural Studies division uses interdisciplinary approaches to study cultural impacts on society. Division of Religious Studies work on studying 15 different religions including Abrahamic Religions covering of branches of Christianity, Judaism and Baha'i as well as Eastern Religions covering Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Graduates of these two divisions later work with the ministry and contribute in creating more minority tolerant and inclusive community. Division of Islamic Studies works on theology and understanding sacred texts of Islam with intention to uplift the Kazakh Muslim community.

### Transformation of Architectural Styles

The architectural style of Almaty has been shaped by the cultural characteristics and traditions outlined above. Ascension Cathedral (Zenkov Cathedral) was built in the late 19th century. This spectacular wooden cathedral features five onion domes and intricate wood carvings, initially served as a mosque before its conversion. The cathedral is notable for its entirely wooden construction without nails and its survival of the 1911 earthquake. Kazakh Academy of Sciences Building's neoclassical monumental style is the reflection of embodiment of the power and permanence of the Soviet regime. Hotel Kazakhstan opened in 1977 is still considered an iconic high-rise building dominating Almaty's skyline with its distinctive shape. Abai State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre is a masterpiece of early 20<sup>th</sup> century built with majestic dome and an opulent interior currently hosting prestigious cultural performances. Central State Museum is a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century monumental structure with a stark façade and symmetrical design. The vast exhibition halls are currently dedicated to Kazakhstan's history and culture. Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center is a futuristic tent-shaped structure built in the early 21st century. During the period of independence and national revival, this architecture with usage of new materials and technologies is a daring attempt to look forward the future possibilities symbolizing Almaty's modern aspirations. Green City Almaty is a mixed-use development, currently under construction incorporating green roofs, solar panels, and sustainable building practices, showcasing Kazakhstan's commitment to environmental responsibility. Esentai Tower completed in 2008 is another reflection of contemporary architectural developments of Almaty. The most unique cultural and public space experience one can get in Almaty is the Almaty Metro. It was inaugurated in 2011 and showcases the modern design combined with traditional Kazakh motifs offering a contemporary interpretation of public transportation aesthetics. Each station offers different themes and design.<sup>23,24</sup>

### Conclusion

Through comprehensive content analysis and academic collaboration, this paper highlights Almaty's remarkable ability to absorb and adapt these varied influences, showcasing its role as a dynamic center of cultural heritage and modern

<sup>19</sup>Neil J. Melvin, 'Elites of North-Eastern Kazakhstan in a New Geopolitical Context, 1989-95', 1999.

<sup>20</sup>Nadia Hannawi, 'The Manifestations of the Volition Philosophy in the Mind of Al-Farabi', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 94.3 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.26577/jos.2020.v94.i3.11>>.

<sup>21</sup>N K Nyshanbayev and Zh M Tolen, 'The Role of Al-Farabi and Abay Kunanbayev in the Formation of the Identity of the Kazakh People in XXI Century', 2021 <<https://doi.org/10.48010/2021.1/1999-5849.071N>>.

<sup>22</sup>Abay Qunanbayuli and others, *Abai Kunanbayev: Selected Poems*, 1970.

<sup>23</sup>Laura Aukhadiyeva and Tatsiana Karatseyeva, 'Architectural Images and Symbols of the Regional Identity of Modern Architecture in Kazakhstan', *Innovaciencia*, 10.1 (2022), 1-17 <<https://doi.org/10.15649/2346075X.2960>>.

<sup>24</sup>Kuralay Murzabayeva, Elena Lapshina, and Ainagul Tuyakayeva, 'Modernization of the Living Environment Space Using the Example of an Urban Array of Residential Buildings from the Soviet Period in Almaty', *Buildings*, 12.7 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings12071042>>.

aspirations. As Kazakhstan's largest city continues to navigate its place within both national and global contexts, Almaty stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural synthesis and evolution.

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