

# ELEMENTS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND EPIC STORIES OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Starting my report, I would like to emphasize that ethnic identity has always been represented by a wide range of elements beginning from the basic such as the ethnic self-consciousness. I deliberately abstain from academic style of delivering and specific terms and definitions, understanding that nowadays the audience is widely represented not only by the professional ethnologists and anthropologists, but by the representatives of culture sector and general public as well.

We all are aware of how much importance and attention UNESCO pays for safeguarding world cultural heritage. Over the years humanity has created a culturally diverse and interrelated global community. One of its characteristics is the Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of humanity that encounters many nations' spiritual and cultural heritage. The register as well as the Convention for the safeguarding of ICH embodies many years of UNESCO's efforts and hard work towards safeguarding the ICH of humanity and today it represents common heritage of all mankind that will be carefully transmitted from generation to generation as one of the most valuable things existing on the earth. Kazakhstan ratified the Convention in 2011 and the work on ICH inventory-making and creation of mechanisms to safeguard our ICH recently began. In

this regard there is much work to accomplish in the long run.

Speaking of Kazakhstan, we cannot mention the fact that nowadays our country refers to the list of states characterized by diverse ethnic, religious and cultural background. This has not always been the case, multiethnic composition of Kazakhstan has been formed by the 20th century as a result of series of historic events. Let me briefly mention the most important of them.

At the end of the 1920s, Kazakhstan (one of the USSR republics at that time) was mainly monoethnic. It is widely known that the policy of Stalinist leadership was aimed to create the society without social classes, the society of equal; however, one of the measures applied for the purpose of creating such society was terror and intimidation. The first political frontiersmen appeared on the territory of Kazakhstan in the 1920s. Mainly it was the representatives of clergy, opposition, intellectuals, artists and former the Imperial government officials. It is also important to note that in the middle of the 1920s, all prospering farmers and businessmen who achieved material wealth were ‘dispossessed’ of their property and forced to migrate to other regions of the USSR.

Another tragic page in the history of Kazakhstan as a part of Soviet state was political repressions being particularly strong after 1934. Kazakhstan as well as the northern regions of the USSR - the Urals and Siberia - were chosen as a place of exile for the millions of Soviet citizens. Karaganda concentration camp *Karlag* as a part infamous Gulag was located in the central region of Kazakhstan. It was a big concentration camp where the ideological opponents of *Bolsheviks* from all over the territory of the USSR were exiled. Another concentration camp was located in the Kazakh steppes was *ALZHIR* (Akmola camp for the wives of the traitors of Motherland), where wives of prominent party and military leaders were

exiled. Among the officially declared enemies were Kazakhstan people of different ethnic backgrounds that faced repressions and persecutions - some of them were shot and others were sent to prisons and concentration camps. The regime of keeping people in fear of retaliatory terror machine was established all over the territory of the USSR.

Since 1935 relocations took massive character and were often carried out along ethnic lines: 64,000 people from Ukraine namely Germans and Polish were deported. With the purpose of 'clearing up' the border lines of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan the big communities of Kurds, Armenians, Turks and Iranians were moved in 1937 to southern Kazakhstan. In 1937 nearly 300,000 ethnic Koreans were forcibly deported from the Far East.

The beginning of the Great Patriotic War initiated a new wave of political repressions. Primarily they affected on the Volga Germans. Hundreds of thousands of Germans were deported to the Republic of Komi, the Urals, Kazakhstan and Siberia. During three weeks, nearly half a million Germans were moved to Kazakhstan. During the Second World War such ethnic groups as Karachai, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingushes, Greeks, Bulgarians, Crimean Tatars, Kurds, Meskhetian Turks and other were repressed and forcibly exiled from the territory of the northern and southern Caucasus and Crimea to Kazakhstan.

It would be wrong to define the actions taken by the USSR government as lacking logic. The German forces indeed planned to strengthen their positions in the Caucuses and other regions by means of introducing their agents among the local population to conduct a sabotage and at tracting the ethnic minorities on the side of Wehrmacht. However, even such risks cannot be invoked to justify forced deportation of entire nations.

By the time of the first massive and forced migrations, the Kazakh

population was citizens of one big USSR state for nearly 20 years and closely associated themselves with the big family of brotherhood nations. People coming to Kazakhstan landed from freight train wagons to face the harsh wilderness of steppes with no food, accommodation or any essential items for surviving. The local Kazakh people living nearby brought food, water, clothes and often welcomed the sick, weak people and families with infants despite the fear of punishment. To a large extent, the support of the local population, their care and compassion helped deported people to survive in harsh conditions. This attitude was employed after the rehabilitation of the deportees. Representatives of once alien ethnic groups became an essential part of Kazakhstan society, its fundamental and core integrating element. Nowadays representatives of all ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan take part in political, social and economic life of the country.

It is widely known that diasporas living in isolation from their maternal homeland and native ethnic environment develop in their own way. Their traditional culture is influenced by a number of social factors, such as different legal and linguistic environment, cultural and other differences.

In this regard, the goal of every ethnic group regardless of its quantitative composition is safeguarding the elements of their native culture such as rituals and traditions. There are very favourable conditions in the Republic of Kazakhstan for safeguarding traditional culture of different ethnic groups. Every ethnic group has its cultural centers, associations monitored and supported by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. One of the primary goals set by the National Committee for the Safeguarding of ICH is inventory-making of the ICH of not only Kazakh people, but all ethnic groups represented in Kazakhstan.

We live in a rapidly changing world. A normal living in modern society is associated with constant growth. The advanced production technologies

offer a variety of goods, and the range of services and assortment of products are expanding. Mobility of the population is increasing in industrial and postindustrial societies; close interaction of people from different parts of the world lead to a blurring of cultural differences between people. However, ethnic issues still prevail in the world; it would be wrong to assume that only some countries face them. Ethnic issues existing in many European countries, Canada, post-Soviet areas and many other regions of the world prove that the problem of ethnic identification is still relevant and global. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Republic of Kazakhstan is aimed to create conditions for the peaceful, conflict-free coexistence of many nations and nurture tolerance among the Kazakhstani citizens towards the incoming immigrants.

To date, the scientists have not reached consensus on main markers of ethnic identity; however most of them relate to the language. Indeed, the language competence, the language behavior and the language preference serve as a factor of identification with one's ethnic community and the level of identity is often determined by the preference of language rather than its actual use. As a rule, people define their ethnic identity with the native ethnic groups and among signs linking them with their ethnic community they name a language, a historical fate, customs, traditions, rituals and other certain character traits.

The language as one of the most important ethnic features develops, transforms and changes under certain conditions and situations. There is an example with the Kazakh language. For over 24 years, Kazakhstan has been an independent state, and the earlier period from the annexation of Kazakhstan to the Russian empire in the 18th century until 1991 is characterized by the strong influence of the Russian language. The documentation and social activities were conducted in Russian, especially

during the 70-year period of USSR existence. The state policy and ideological doctrine led to the formation of a unified society, strengthening of the Russian language among the population of Kazakhstan and displacement of the native Kazakh language to the private and family level. During the entire Soviet rule, the main state language all over the territory of the USSR was Russian. By the 1980s the official documentation in urban areas was fully Russian and documentation in the Kazakh language was very limited in rural areas. The policy led to the decrease of the number of schools with the Kazakh language of instruction throughout the territory of Kazakhstan.

Two factors in addition to public policy led to the ‘russification’ of the Kazakh people: increase in the share of Russian-speaking population and the development of education system. The first process was implemented in stages: construction of large industrial enterprises, then evacuation of factories and their employees during the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) from the European territories of the USSR, then development of virgin and fallow lands for farming needs. All the processes required migration of the Russian-speaking employees, their families, etc. By that time, the Soviet Union collapsed according to some political analysts; the total number of the Russian speaking population of Kazakhstan outnumbered the native Kazakh population. Thus, there was a linguistic assimilation meaning suppression of one language group by a bigger one.

All the factors listed above are not the only reasons for linguistic assimilation, we just focused on the most obvious and major reasons seriously impacting the situation. In this regard, this is a typical situation for any population falling within the political and economic dependence from the strong center, and it has many historic records throughout the world.

At the present moment we are witnessing a situation as the Kazakh

language has legally gained the status of the state language but in fact has not yet become ubiquitous. Lately in such spheres as jurisdiction, public administration, education, science, culture, and mass media, the Kazakh language has taken the firm position. For example, in the field of public administration, one of the employment requirements for the aspiring civil servants is knowledge of the state language, to the extent necessary to perform the official duties. Currently at preschool, middle and high schools, pupils study the Kazakh language as a compulsory subject already yielding positive results.

For sure, the language is one of the factors of ethnic identity, but at the same time, the level of ethnic identity does not always reflect the actual possession of the mother tongue. In support of the thesis on transformation or loss of native language, I would like to note, for instance, that the Kazakhstani Koreans not speaking their native language, but the Russian or Kazakh languages, have safeguarded and maintained their ethnic identity and traditional culture.

Apart from language, the ethnic identity can be defined by a number of factors or markers, including the elements of traditional culture. The abovementioned historic legacy of the Soviet ideological doctrine rule as well affected the state of many elements of traditional culture. During that period traditional culture was perceived as unnecessary remnants of past being alien to a progressive Soviet man, many elements of traditional knowledge and practices were irretrievably lost. Some cultural elements have undergone natural transformation and adaptation to the changes of surrounding environment while others survived losing the basis of motivation.

The surge of ethnic identity occurring as a consequence of gaining independence by Kazakhstan drew public attention to the need of reviving lost traditions necessary for strengthening ethnic identity. All this coincided

with the program of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan aimed to return the Kazakh repatriates from neighboring countries to their historic homeland. As I mentioned before, every diaspora/ethnic group living away from their homeland aims to preserve its culture and traditions intact. In this regard, the Kazakh repatriates called *Oralmans* in great extent brought back some of the traditions which we have lost and they safeguarded, such as the forgotten craft techniques, different types of crafts, traditional healing practices, knowledge in traditional veterinary medicine and much more.

To date, the National Committee for the Safeguarding of the ICH of the Republic of Kazakhstan after raising awareness among general public on the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding ICH took initial steps towards ICH inventory-making in Kazakhstan. It is true that the required speed of work did not come at once, but today we can already witness the results of the work carried out. Our efforts can be seen in the National Register of ICH elements, nominations submitted for the inscription on the Representative list of the ICH of humanity. A number of artisan practices, performing arts, vocal genres, play on various folk instruments, rituals and festivals, hunting with birds of prey, folk games like *Asyks* and many more have been inventoried.

Among the ICH elements included in the National ICH Register there are epic tales like the cycle of 50 heroic epics. Such a big number of epic poems each having heroic story are influenced by the history of the Kazakh people who throughout the centuries were subject to numerous military attacks. Every heroic epic tale is dedicated to one outstanding soldier *Batyr*, his character, personality and heroic deeds. Being narrated from one generation to another and surviving throughout ages in the form of oral narrations, epics serve the function of forming the sense of patriotism

among younger generation.

The epic stories of the Kazakh people are not limited only to heroic and military content, but one of the main themes praised in world culture is the theme of love. Love as well as other feelings like jealousy, treachery and loyalty is reflected in famous lyric-epic poems like *Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan-Sulu*, *Kyz Zhibek*, *Enlik-Kebek* and many other epics. These epics are an excellent illustration of the complex tribal relations among the Kazakh people. The subtlety of the Kazakh poetry shows romantic nature of nomads, whose entire lives passed in deep conjunction with the nature and therefore philosophic reflections.

At this point let me complete my brief overview of ethnic identity in Kazakhstan and the Kazakh epic stories which I described without violating timing and existing rules. A more detailed description of these two topics deserves writing of doctoral theses.