

Folk Holidays as the Historical Roots of Uzbek Spirituality

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Abstract

A nation's developmental path and socioeconomic vitality can often be understood through its national holidays. The Uzbek people possess a multi-millennial tradition of festive and ritual culture that lies at the heart of their national identity. Despite their rich historical, architectural, and scientific heritage, detailed studies of national holidays and traditional ethno-sports were significantly marginalized during the Soviet period. This study seeks to investigate the origins, socio-cultural importance, and recent developments of Uzbek national holidays and traditional games (ethno-sports), filling a gap in current cultural, historical, and anthropological research.

Keywords: National holidays, ethno-sport, Kupkari, Kurash, Chavgon, globalization, spirituality, ethno-tourism, cyber games and virtual games

1. Introduction

It is not difficult to determine a nation's level of development by observing how it celebrates its holidays. Holidays provide a vivid representation of a people's social, economic, and cultural condition, acting as a mirror that reflects the finest aspects of social life. A comprehensively developed nation naturally possesses culturally enriching and vibrant holidays [1, 2].

Uzbek people's holidays have developed from ancient times to today, shaped by historical needs. They have navigated social conflicts and gained insights from other nations' experiences. Yet, current research on Uzbek history and culture often overlooks these national holidays, which are vital to people's lives. Additionally, the history, traditions, and current status of these holidays lack dedicated, thorough study [3, 4].

The gap in studying Uzbek national holidays stems from the Soviet era when both official and unofficial research into these traditions was forbidden; only Soviet holidays were openly studied. With independence, new chances arose to examine Uzbek customs and folk festivals objectively [5]. Recently, some aspects of national traditions and holidays have started to be explored. It is now essential to conduct a thorough and honest investigation of Uzbek national holidays, considering our heritage from historical, political, philosophical, ethical, ethnological, and cultural viewpoints [6].

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Literature Review

The significance of games in people's lives is evident in the works of notable Eastern scholars like Firdawsi, Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Kaikavus, Alisher Navoi, and Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur. These thinkers shared deep insights on various facets of games: Firdawsi on traditional games, Al-Biruni on ancient peoples' games, Ibn Sina on the health benefits of games, Mahmud al-Kashgari on Turkic games' detailed descriptions, Kaikavus on the ethics of engaging in games, Alisher Navoi on the artistic portrayal of heroic games, and Babur on the joy and passion these activities inspire [7].

The documentation of Uzbek national games and their teaching methods for youth mainly dates back to the latter half of the 19th century. It is important to acknowledge the role of Russian travelers and scholars who engaged in archaeological and historical research during this period. Key figures include L. Bajenko, A. Borj, G. Vambery, and A. Arandarenko, whose contributions are particularly significant [8].

At the beginning of the 20th century, scholars in the fields of pedagogy, history, and archaeology, including E. Nalivkin, V. Bartold, N. Burzinsky, G. Vinogradov, S. P. Tolstov, as well as the Uzbek archaeologist Y. Gulyamov, paid considerable attention to national active games [9, 10].

2. Research Method

This study uses a rigorous qualitative research design, specifically adopting a historical-ethnographic approach to systematically examine the development of Uzbek ethnospports and national holidays. To align with international academic standards, the methodology is organized around three main aspects: data collection, analytical frameworks, and the principle of maintaining historical objectivity.

Data Collection and Sources

The research relies on a comprehensive triangulation of qualitative data sources to reconstruct the historical continuum of national holidays:

Archaeological Evidence: Review of published archaeological reports and discoveries (such as S. P. Tolstov's excavations at Jonbos-kala and Koykrylgan-kala) to identify the physical presence of wrestling and equestrian sports in pre-Islamic Central Asia.

A systematic review of primary medieval manuscripts and written records from the Eastern Renaissance, such as Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Divan Lughat al-Turk*, Abu Ali Ibn Sina's *The Canon of Medicine*, and Kaikavus's *Qabusnama*.

Folklore and Oral History: Analyzing intangible cultural artifacts like ancient epics (*Alpamish*, *Gorogly*, *Manas*) and ethnographic essays to explore the socio-cultural and mythological importance of these games within indigenous communities.

Analytical Methods

The collected data were processed using the following core analytical methods:

Historical-Comparative Analysis: This approach was used to examine how ethnospports have appeared in different historical periods, from ancient times to the modern globalization era, and among various Central Asian ethnic groups.

Systematization and Generalization: Data on more than 150 ancient games were organized and summarized to reveal pedagogical, physical, and socio-spiritual patterns. This process trace their evolution from military training activities to contemporary celebratory events.

Hermeneutic Analysis: Applied to interpret the underlying philosophical and ethical meanings embedded in medieval texts and oral epics regarding physical culture.

Considering the extensive marginalization and ideological censorship of national holidays during the Soviet era, this research strictly follows the principle of scientific objectivity. It avoids ideological biases by using verified historical data and cross-checked primary sources, ensuring an unbiased reconstruction of the genuine cultural spirituality of the Uzbek people.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

The Genesis and Evolution of Ethno-sports

Folk games, regarded as ethno-sports, have long been a vital part of the traditions, rituals, weddings, and large festive events of Central Asian peoples. Popular mass folk games like Kurash (traditional wrestling) and Kupkari (goat pulling) have crossed national and cultural borders, especially in the context of market economies and the digital age, gaining international recognition. This highlights the need for an ethnological study of the origins, evolution, local ethno-cultural features, and changes of folk games, considering the populations of our country and the surrounding region [11, 12].

Ethnologists estimate that the 3,000 to 5,000 known Uzbek folk games have a history spanning several thousand years, with origins rooted in antiquity. There is extensive information about the history of these games in both historical and written records. For example, detailed accounts of popular folk games like Kurash, Chavgon (polo), Kupkari, and Chillak (tipcat) are prominently featured in the historical and literary works from the 9th to 12th centuries, during the First Eastern Renaissance [13]. While written sources specifically about Uzbek national Kurash do not go back beyond a thousand years, and records from the ancient and early medieval periods have not survived, archaeological finds offer significant evidence of folk games, especially wrestling and equestrian sports [14].

Archaeological and Historical Evidence

Most significant insights into folk games in ancient and medieval periods come from archaeological findings. Excavations by Russian scholar and archaeologist S. P. Tolstov (1907-1976) at the Jonbos-kala site in Khorezm showed that traditional wrestling was popular among different clan groups as early as the 4th century BCE [15]. During these excavations, images of wrestlers in action and a triangular drinking vessel from Koykrylgan-kala (4th-3rd centuries BCE) depicting fighters were uncovered. Tolstov observed that in the past, ancestors held wrestling contests during various celebrations and festivals, especially during Navruz days [16, 17].

Academician A. Askarov's article, "The Reflection of Uzbek National Kurash in Archaeological Materials," is a notable work exploring Kurash through archaeological findings. The researcher examined various specialized texts, archaeological reports, collections, murals, and art artifacts to gather valuable insights. Using artifacts from Sogdiana and Margiana, he uncovered important details about wrestling and drew key conclusions [18]. Additionally, he conducted a comparative study between archaeological artifacts featuring mythological imagery popular among Turkic peoples and folk oral traditions, analyzing elements of Altai mythology alongside mythological images in the epic Manas [19].

Ethno-sports in Folklore and Literature

Information about the history and ethnography of folk games, as reflected in epics and religious-mythological works from ancient, medieval, and later periods, is extremely important. Data found in the Zoroastrian sacred book Avesta, Uzbek folk epics Alpomish and Gorogly, the Kyrgyz folk epic Manas, and the Tajik folk epic Pahlavon Rustam are especially significant for studying the historical and mythological foundations of folk games [20].

Folklore materials are essential for exploring the history of traditional sports like Kupkari, Kurash, and Chavgon. Many key details about our national sports are found in rare examples of Uzbek folk oral arts, such as epics including Qirqqiz, Avazxon, Rustamxon, Ravshan, Kuntugmish, and Yadgar. They are also present in fairy tales like Londapolvon, Ziyod batir, Pahlavon Rustam, and Aqlli kiz. These stories recount equestrian sports, martial arts contests, and their associated physical and ethical principles.

Historically, Kurash, a strength test, was widely practiced among the peoples of present-day Uzbekistan since ancient times. Insights into wrestling, common among tribes such as the Saka, Massagetae, Sogdians, and Tokharians, are documented in the works of the Greek historian Quintus Curtius Rufus (1st century CE) and the ancient writer Aelianus Claudius (175-235) [21].

Early written sources document that folk games, equestrian exercises, horse-racing preparations, and the ongoing enhancement of warriors' equestrian, martial, and combat skills were sustained through races, competitions, and wrestling tournaments. Episodes and detailed accounts of traditional folk games, along with information on physical strength and heroism, appear in works such as Abu'l-Qasim Firdawsi's Shahnameh (935-1020), Mahmud al-Kashgari's Divan Lughat al-Turk (11th century), Abu Ali Ibn Sina's The Canon of Medicine (980-1037), Kaikavus's Qabusnama (11th century), Omar Khayyam's Navruznama (1048-1131), Yusuf Khass Hajib's Kutadgu Bilig (11th century), Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi's Futuvvatnamayi Sultani (1442-1505), Saadi's Gulistan (1219-1293), Alisher Navoi's Khamsa, Lisan ut-Tayr, Mahbub ul-Qulub (1441-1501), Zaynuddin Wasifi's Badai' al-Waqai' (1485-1566), Amir Timur's Maxims (1336-1405), and Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur's Baburnama (1483-1530).

Additional insights into the origins and evolution of folk games can be found in historical, archaeological, ethnographic, and literary sources. These include Oybek's historical novel "Alisher Navoi" and his novella "Childhood," Pirimqul Qodirov's "Starry Nights," Mirmuhsin's "Temur Malik," Radiy Fish's "Jalaluddin Rumi," and works by contemporary author Tog'ay Murod. Moreover, the ethnographic essay "Ori qo'shiq bo'lgan yurt" (The Land Where Honor Became a Song) by Guljahon Mardonova offers intriguing legends about the beginnings of Kupkari, along with insights into related rituals, customs, traditions, and clothing [22].

Encyclopedic Classifications in Medieval Works

Mahmud al-Kashgari's Divan Lughat al-Turk from the 11th century offers fascinating insights into nearly 150 folk games of the Turkic peoples—such as Chigil, Yaghma, Turkmen, Oghuz, and Kyrgyz—who inhabited areas from Turkestan to Termez and from the Caspian and Aral seas to the Tien Shan foothills. Al-Kashgari carefully explored the history, national psychology, geography, language, and social customs of these groups. He mentions 150 games, 20 of which are described in detail, and classifies them by age and type, distinguishing between physical and mental games. This shows that many modern ethnospports and intellectual games were already common among Turkic peoples in the 11th century.

Water competitions are also especially significant. Diving (gavvaslik) is a very ancient practice, with al-Kashgari's work describing two types of water contests: one involving swimming, diving, crossing water, and playing tag; the other, games for fun and entertainment. The Divan lists various children's games such as oshiq (knucklebones), chillak (tipcat), ball games, and girls' swing games. Many games from the 11th century closely resemble those played by children today. For example, the game called "Utish-utish" is similar to "Kesak kuydi," "Darra soldi," and "Musht ketdi." Along the banks of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the foothills of the Aral, and nearby streams and lakes, an ancient children's game called "Muguz-muguz" was played.

The renowned physician Abu Ali Ibn Sina (980-1037) reflected on folk games and demonstrated both theoretically and practically their vital role in physical education. From a perspective of human health and medical care, he categorized physical education—considered a fundamental folk game—into five main types: quick movements, delicate and light motions, powerful actions, extremely forceful movements, and specialized body maneuvers, explaining each category. Ibn Sina also provided detailed information about our national Kurash, especially the styles from Bukhara and Fergana. He outlined its various forms: one involves wrestlers grabbing each other's belts and pulling while trying to escape or hold on; another features one wrestler holding the other's body with both hands to throw him, requiring specific arm positions.

Kaikavus's Qabusnama (11th century) offers important insights into folk games, covering topics such as humor, the ethics of chess and backgammon, horse buying, playing Chavgon (polo), child-rearing, and chivalry (juvonmardlik). Omar Khayyam's Navruznama (1048-1131) provides a detailed account of the ancient origins of the Navruz holiday, along with related customs, traditions, and games. It offers valuable evidence of activities such as fencing, archery, and equestrian sports practiced during Navruz.

Pahlavon Mahmud Puryorvaliy (1247-1325) was a notable Khorezmian writer fluent in many languages. He regularly practiced physical training, especially Karate. Known as an undefeated hero and a refined poet, he traveled extensively throughout Eastern countries, competing and giving his prizes to people in poverty. He supported himself through his father's fur trade. Historical records indicate that Pahlavon Mahmud won wrestling matches in Delhi, India, and later helped free enslaved compatriots, returning them to Khorezm.

In summary, top scholars of Central Asia and Uzbekistan highlighted the significance and social-psychological impact of national sports games on youth development in their academic work.

Discussion

The contemporary era of rapid globalization dictates that the environment in which children spend their youth significantly shapes our future. While earlier generations grew up with various folk games and didactic activities, it is impossible to ignore the negative aspects alongside the positive elements of computer graphics games in the information technology era for today's youth.

Promoting national sports is crucial for conserving intangible cultural heritage and advancing physical education and sports. Childhood is closely linked to various games, competitions, and reading, all of which are essential for personal growth.

Uzbekistan's expertise in organizing holidays is considered the most advanced in the CIS and is regarded with pride. Many international scholars recognize the high standards of Uzbekistan's holiday traditions and conduct research to learn from local practices. As the

saying goes, "Water flowing nearby has no value," suggesting that foreign researchers are increasingly studying Uzbek holidays. Notably, Western sociologists such as American sociologist Laura Adams have shown great interest. She visited Uzbekistan, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Uzbek holidays, and defended it in the United States.

The primary practical success of Uzbekistan's holidays is the development of a new central spectacle. This theatrical musical-choreographic performance blends traditional-historical elements with modern themes, with no exact equivalent worldwide. The public has widely praised the show's unique format.

4. Conclusion

The article's content leads to the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Media and Social Promotion: Besides traditional competitions, it is essential to arrange a series of TV programs and digital broadcasts showcasing veteran masters and wrestlers under the slogan "National Folk Games – National Pride" to enhance the popularity of national sports and folk games.
2. Virtual commercialization involves experts transforming traditional games into animations and computer graphics: Broadly commercializing these games in the virtual realm could greatly support children's development. This strategy will be key to protecting the younger generation from the negative impacts of unfamiliar computer games, helping cultivate mentally, psychologically, and spiritually healthy individuals.
3. Philosophical Value: Ethno-sport games capture the core goals of uniting communities, promoting defense, fostering healthy generations, and enhancing mental skills. Consequently, it is crucial to develop local games that help individuals become physically healthy, determined, patient, responsive, and spiritually mature.

In conclusion, a deep and thorough study of the holidays of the Uzbek people is essential, as their origins have been developing since ancient times.

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