

Kazakh Kuresi as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Context of Global Sports and International Recognition

Aisultan Zheldibay

Candidate for Master of Sport in Kazakh Kuresi, USA



Abstract

The article examines the Kazakh Sport as an element of intangible cultural heritage and, simultaneously, as a modern institutionalized sport. The dual logic of development is analyzed: "protection/inheritance" through UNESCO mechanisms and national registries, "sportization" through the standardization of rules, the bureaucratization of governance, media packaging, and international competitions. Based on the theoretical approaches of N. Elias and E. Dunning, as well as A. Guttman, it is shown that international recognition of sport The kures strengthens the cultural legitimacy of the practice, but simultaneously increases the risks of simplifying local meanings and "folklorizing" them to suit the expectations of the global sports market. Principles of a balanced development model are proposed: preserving the diversity of tradition within a unified competitive "core," prioritizing communities and practitioners in governance, and establishing ethical standards for representation and commercialization.

Keywords: Kuresi in Kazakhstan, UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage, sportization, institutionalization, globalization of sport, cultural policy, media.

Introduction

Kazakh kuresi (in UNESCO documents - Kuresi in Kazakhstan) is one of the traditional bodily practices that simultaneously exist as a cultural tradition and as a modern competitive sport. This duality is particularly noticeable in the context of globalization: on the one hand, practices of this type are included in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection programs, while on the other, they are increasingly being integrated into international sporting formats through the unification of rules, the development of federal structures, mediatization, and commercialization.

A key event for the cultural and legal status of Kazakh kuresi was the inclusion of the element "Kuresi in Kazakhstan" in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The official description of the element emphasizes its traditional nature (the transmission of skills, local competitions), but also acknowledges the modern sporting reality: the practice is developing as a national sport, there is a professional level, and international competitions are held. Moreover, UNESCO directly refers to the international media expansion, noting that the "Kazakhstan" tournament Barysy "is broadcast in "more than 100 countries" [1].

At the same time, the growth of international representation is inevitably linked to a process that is described in the sociology of sport as “sportization”. In the reference literature (Oxford Reference) sportization is defined as a term introduced by Norbert Elias, to designate the process by which folk games and popular cultural activities are transformed by the development of norms of behavior, rules, and organizational codes into the “sport” of the modern type [2]. In application to traditional martial arts, sportization is usually expressed in: standardization of rules; formalization of refereeing; division into categories; strengthening of safety requirements; bureaucratization of management and inclusion in international competition calendar systems.

To analyze how traditional practice is changing under the pressure of sports modernization, it is productive to use the classical criteria of “modern sport” proposed by Allen Guttman, where rationalization, bureaucratization, and quantification (measurability of results, regulations, comparability) occupy a central place [3]. At the level of institutional mechanisms, these trends are also visible in relation to Kazakh kuresi: for international regulation, official rules are published that apply to competitions sanctioned by the United World Wrestling (UWW), which directly establishes the obligation of uniform standards for international events [4].

Thus, today the Kazakh Kures develops in “two modes” simultaneously: as an object of cultural protection and as an object of sports management (international rules, competitions, media). International recognition through UNESCO enhances the symbolic value of the practice and expands its visibility, but sportification and mediatization can lead to risks: the unification of regional variations, a shift in emphasis from community transmission to a show format, and “folklorization” - the reduction of tradition to a decorative ethnic framework. In this regard, the question of how to reconcile international sports standardization with the principles of preserving intangible heritage, where variability, the role of tradition bearers, and the cultural meanings of the practice are important, becomes particularly relevant.

Research Materials and Methods

The study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative interdisciplinary approach combining methods from the sociology of sport, cultural studies, and intangible cultural heritage studies. The empirical and theoretical basis of the work was formed by official international documents, regulatory sources, and scientific publications devoted to the processes of sportification and heritageization of traditional forms of wrestling. The main materials used were: UNESCO documents on the element “Kuresi” in Kazakhstan, including the description of the element on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the decision of the Intergovernmental Committee on inscription (2016), reflecting the institutional basis for international recognition; periodic reports of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, containing information on measures to preserve, transmit and popularize Kazakh normative and organizational materials of international sports structures (United World Wrestling), fixing the status of Kazakh sports in the system of international sports management; scientific works on the theory of sportization (N. Elias, E. Dunning, A. Guttman) and comparative studies of traditional types of wrestling, analyzing the interaction of sports and cultural heritage.

Methodologically, the work relies on qualitative content analysis aimed at identifying key narratives and concepts associated with two analytical planes:

a) discourse of intangible cultural heritage (transmission of tradition, role of carrier communities, cultural values);

b) discourse of sport (standardization of rules, institutionalization, competition, mediatization).

To interpret the obtained data, a comparative-analytical method was used, which allows us to compare the characteristics of the Kazakh language. The study was based on general models of modernization of traditional bodily practices described in the international scientific literature. The theoretical generalization was based on the concept of sportization as a form of social modernization of play and bodily practice, which allowed us to identify key contradictions and points of convergence between the demands of global sport and the principles of intangible cultural heritage protection.

The application of these methods provided a comprehensive analysis of the current situation of Kazakh national football in the context of global sportization and international cultural recognition.

Research Results

As a result of the analysis of international documents, regulatory materials of sports organizations and scientific publications, key directions of the modern development of Kazakh national sport were identified, reflecting its dual status: as an intangible cultural heritage and as an institutionalized sport.

1. International recognition and institutionalization. It has been established that the inclusion of the element «Kuresi in Kazakhstan» UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016 became a major factor in international cultural legitimization. UNESCO official materials emphasize that this practice plays an important role in strengthening social cohesion, transmitting values and intergenerational experience, and is actively developing in a modern form through clubs, schools, and competitions [1].

At the same time, an increase in sports institutionalization was recorded: Kazakh kuresi represented in the international sports governance system through the United World Wrestling (UWW), which implies the application of unified rules, refereeing regulations, and competition requirements [4]. Thus, international recognition is achieved in parallel on two levels: cultural and sporting.

2. Manifestations of sportization in modern practice. Content analysis of normative and descriptive sources made it possible to identify the main features of the sportization of Kazakh sports, corresponding to the classical criteria for the modernization of sports described by A. Guttman [3]. These include standardizing the rules of the fight, introducing weight and age categories, formalizing the judging process, and focusing on competitive results.

UNESCO documents emphasize that even in the context of professionalization, elements of traditional knowledge transfer through mentoring, the participation of senior wrestlers, and competitions held during folk festivals are preserved [1]. This indicates an incomplete and "soft" form of sportification, in which modernization does not completely displace the cultural components of practice.

3. Mediatization and expansion of the international audience. A separate result of the study was the identification of the role of media in globalization. The UNESCO dossier notes that major national tournaments, such as "Kazakhstan Barysy" are broadcast outside the country and

contribute to the growth of international interest in this type of wrestling [5]. In the scientific literature, the mediatization of sport is considered a factor that enhances the spectacle and commercial appeal, but simultaneously influences the format and content of competitions [6].

For Kazakh kuresi, this translates into shorter fight times, an emphasis on throwing techniques, and visually striking elements, which aligns with general trends in the global sports market.

4. Comparison of the characteristics of heritage and sportization. The results of the comparative analysis made it possible to systematize the key characteristics of Kazakh kuresi in two analytical dimensions: intangible cultural heritage and modern sports (Table 1).

Table 1 - Key characteristics of Kazakh kuresi in the context of heritage and sportization

Criterion	Intangible cultural heritage	Sportization / modern sports
Status	Element of the UNESCO Representative List	A type of struggle against international rules
Broadcast	Intergenerational, through communities and mentors	System of sports schools and clubs
Regulation	Flexible, allowing for local variations	Standardized rules and judging
Values	Traditions, respect, educational function	Result, rating, sporting achievements
Publicity	Holidays, cultural events	Tournaments, TV broadcasts, media formats

The obtained results show that modern development of Kazakh kuresi is characterized not by the replacement of tradition with sports uniforms, but by their coexistence. International recognition through UNESCO and inclusion in the global sports arena form a sustainable, but potentially challenging, development model that requires further analysis and management balance.

Discussion

The obtained results confirm that modern development of Kazakh The sport follows the logic of double institutionalization: on the one hand, the practice is enshrined as an object of intangible cultural heritage within the framework of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, on the other, it is integrated into the international sporting space through the standardization of rules, federal governance, and mediatization. This configuration corresponds to the findings of studies devoted to the sportization of traditional martial arts, where modernization does not eliminate tradition, but rather transfers it to different modes of existence and representation [7].

Enabling the Kuresi element in Kazakhstan's inclusion on the UNESCO Representative List serves not only as a symbolic act of recognition but also as a normative framework, setting requirements for the preservation of variability, the role of host communities, and the intergenerational transmission of practices. In this context, the identified features of sportification (standardization of rules, rankings, refereeing regulations) do not contradict the heritage status, but they create a structural tension between cultural flexibility and sporting standardization. Similar contradictions have been described in studies of Turkish oil wrestling and other traditional forms, where the processes of "heritageization" and "sportification" occur in parallel [8].

The role of media requires special attention. On the one hand, international broadcasts and entertainment formats (e.g., "Kazakhstan Barysy") enhance the global visibility of Kazakh kuresi

and increase youth interest, which is consistent with the objectives of sustainable reproduction of the practice [1]. On the other hand, the media logic of contemporary sport, focused on dynamics and visual effects, is capable of shifting the emphasis from educational and cultural meanings to results and show, as described in works on global media sports [6]. Consequently, mediatization acts simultaneously as a resource and a risk for the preservation of intangible heritage.

Comparison of empirical data with theoretical models of sports modernization allows us to interpret the current stage of development of Kazakh kuresi as a form of controlled sportization, in which cultural legitimation through UNESCO softens the pressure of unification. This distinguishes Kazakh kuresi from "purely sporting" disciplines and brings it closer to hybrid models of development of traditional bodily practices, where sport acts as a tool for preserving, rather than replacing, tradition.

Overall, the discussion of the results shows that sustainable development of Kazakh kuresi is possible provided that two logics are coordinated: sports and cultural. The scientific significance of these findings lies in clarifying the mechanisms for such alignment and in confirming the thesis that sportization is not an unambiguous threat to intangible cultural heritage, but can be considered a form of its contemporary transmission, given appropriate cultural policies and the participation of the communities that carry it.

Conclusions

The study showed that Kazakh kuresi in modern conditions represents a hybrid form of physical practice, combining the characteristics of intangible cultural heritage and an institutionalized sport. International recognition through the inclusion of the element "Kuresi" in Kazakhstan's inclusion on the UNESCO Representative List cemented its cultural significance and simultaneously contributed to its expanded presence in the global sporting arena. The processes of sportification, expressed in the standardization of rules, the formalization of refereeing, and the mediaization of competitions, do not eliminate the traditional foundation of Kazakh sports. However, these trends create a structural tension between the demands of unification and the preservation of cultural diversity. In these circumstances, culturally oriented governance plays a decisive role, ensuring the participation of tradition-bearing communities and adherence to the principles of intangible heritage protection. In general, the sportification of Kazakh kuresi can be seen not as a threat to its cultural identity, but as a tool for the modern transmission and sustainable development of tradition, provided that a scientifically based and balanced approach is taken.

References

1. Kuresi in Kazakhstan: Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [Electronic resource]. – UNESCO, 2016. – Mode access : <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kuresi-in-kazakhstan-01085>
2. Sportization // Oxford Reference [Electronic resource]. – Oxford University Press. – Mode access : <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100524995>
3. Guttmann A. From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports. – New York : Columbia University Press, 2004. – 271 p. - Mode access : <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/from-ritual-to-record/9780231133418/>

4. International Qazaq Kuresi Rules [Electronic resource]. – United World Wrestling, 2023. – Mode access : https://cdn.uww.org/2023-10/final_rules_book_qazaq_kuresi.pdf
5. ITH-16-11.COM-10.b: Nomination file “ Kuresi in Kazakhstan” [Electronic resource]. – UNESCO, 2016. – Mode access : <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/ITH-16-11.COM-10.b-EN.docx>
6. Rowe D. Global Media Sport: Flows, Forms and Futures. – London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. – 248 p. - Mode access : <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/58706/1/9781849666763.pdf>
7. Elias N., Dunning E. Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process. – Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. – 312 p. - Mode access : <https://archive.norbert-elias.com/docs/pdf/07QuestforExcitement.pdf>
8. Krawietz B. The Sportification and Heritage of Traditional Wrestling // Wrestling in Multifarious Modernity / ed. by K. Bromber , B. Krawietz . – London; New York: Routledge , 2013. – Mode access : <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315087726-4>