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FROM DOMESTICATION TO PERFORMANCE: THE CULTUROGENESIS OF HORSE ART IN THE KAZAKH STEPPE

This article explores the cultural and symbolic significance of horse domestication in the Kazakh Steppe as a foundational process in the emergence of equestrian circus traditions. Drawing on archaeological, ethnographic, and historical sources, the paper conceptualizes the taming of wild horses not merely as an economic or technological milestone, but as a profound act of culturogenesis that shaped nomadic identity, spatial practice, and embodied aesthetics. Through an analysis of the Botai culture and traditional Kazakh equestrian rituals, the article traces how early domestication practices evolved into complex performative forms that combined athleticism, ritual, and visual storytelling. These forms later influenced both national equestrian games and modern circus performances. By situating horse art within the broader framework of nomadic heritage and performative culture, the paper contributes to rethinking the genealogy of performance in Central Asia and underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in shaping civilizational values and cultural memory.

Keywords: horse domestication, culturogenesis, equestrian circus art, Kazakh steppe, nomadic heritage, performative culture.

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Жабайы жылқыны қолға үйретуден цирктік перформативтілікке дейін: қазақ даласындағы арғымақ өнерінің мәдени-тарихи қалыптасуы

Бұл мақалада Қазақ даласында жабайы жылқыны қолға үйретудің мәдени-символикалық мәні және оның арғымақтық цирк өнерінің қалыптасуына әсері қарастырылады. Археологиялық, этнографиялық және тарихи деректерге сүйене отырып, жылқыны қолға үйрету тек экономикалық не технологиялық жетістік емес, көшпелі өркениеттің кеңістіктік танымын, дене эстетикасын және перформативтік мәдениетін қалыптастырған түбегейлі культуροгенездік акт ретінде зерделенеді. Ботай мәдениеті мен дәстүрлі атбегілік салт-жоралғылар арқылы жылқы мен адам арасындағы үйлесімділік – кейінгі ұлттық ат ойындары мен кәсіби цирк трюктеріне ұласқанын көрсетеді. Мақала көшпелі мұра мен қазіргі цирктік орындаушылық мәдениет арасындағы сабақтастықты ашып, Орталық Азиядағы перформативтік өнердің тарихи генезисін қайта пайымдауға негіз қалайды. Сонымен қатар жылқы культі мен шабандоздық (джигитовка) өнері қазақ мәдени жадысының өзегін құрайтынын дәлелдейді.

Түйін сөздер: жылқыны қолға үйрету, культуροгенез, арғымақтық цирк өнері, қазақ даласы, көшпенділік мұрасы, перформативтік мәдениет.

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От одомашнивания к перформативности: культурогенез конного искусства в казахской степи

В статье рассматривается культурное и символическое значение одомашнивания лошади в Казахской степи как ключевого процесса культуροгенеза, способствовавшего формированию традиций конного циркового искусства. Основываясь на археологических, этнографических и исторических источниках, авторы интерпретируют приручение дикой лошади не только как

экономическое или технологическое достижение, но как глубокий акт формирования номадической идентичности, пространственных практик и телесной эстетики. Через анализ культуры Ботай и традиционных казахских конных ритуалов прослеживается эволюция ранних форм одомашнивания в сложные перформативные практики, сочетающие физическую подготовку, ритуал и визуальное повествование. Эти формы оказали влияние на развитие национальных конных игр и современного циркового искусства. Рассматривая конное искусство как часть номадического культурного наследия и перформативной традиции, статья вносит вклад в переосмысление генеалогии перформанса в Центральной Азии и подчеркивает значение автохтонных систем знаний в формировании цивилизационных ценностей и культурной памяти.

Ключевые слова: одомашнивание лошади, культурогенез, конное цирковое искусство, казахская степь, номадическое наследие, перформативная культура.

Introduction

The domestication of the horse in the Kazakh Steppe represents not only a technological turning point in human history, but a foundational moment of cultural and civilizational transformation. It catalyzed new forms of mobility, spatial awareness, and human-animal interdependence that shaped the nomadic worldview for millennia. Among the far-reaching consequences of this domestication was the emergence of equestrian art, later developing into sophisticated forms of performance that now occupy a central place in Kazakh cultural memory. This study explores the culturogenesis of horse circus art as rooted in the historical practices of the Kazakh nomads, from early horse taming in Botai culture to contemporary equestrian performances.

Drawing on archaeological evidence from the Botai settlement, historical sources, and ethnographic studies, the article conceptualizes horse domestication as a deeply symbolic and performative act. Beyond its economic or military significance, the horse became embedded in rituals, games, and embodied aesthetics that formed a unique expressive culture. Traditional equestrian games such as *audaryspak*, *kokpar*, and *tenge alu* developed not only as sporting activities but as lived philosophies of dexterity, risk, and communal celebration, precursors to the performative codes of modern circus acts. Figures such as *sal-seri*, stilt walkers (*agashayak*), and trick riders enacted a philosophy of movement, rhythm, and balance between body, animal, and nature.

The modern Kazakh circus, especially in its equestrian forms, retains the trace of these deep nomadic traditions. This study seeks to uncover the cultural, aesthetic, and symbolic continuities between ancient practices of horsemanship and their transformation into stylized performance. It argues that Kazakh horse art should be recognized as a distinct philosophical and cultural system, rooted in steppe cosmology, ritual performance, and the

embodied knowledge of the rider. In doing so, the article contributes to a broader rethinking of circus genealogy through the lens of indigenous cultural production and nomadic epistemology.

Justification of the Topic and Its Relevance. The choice of this topic is driven by the need to fill a significant scholarly gap in the study of the cultural genesis of equestrian circus art within the Kazakh context. While Western historiography of circus art often emphasizes 18th–19th century European developments and equestrian schools, there is little recognition of the deep nomadic roots and performative traditions in Central Asia that predate these by millennia. The domestication of the horse in the Kazakh Steppe – particularly as documented in the Botai culture – has long been studied from archaeological and zoological perspectives, yet its implications for understanding cultural performance, symbolism, and embodied aesthetics remain underexplored. The urgent relevance of this topic lies in the growing interest in decolonial cultural histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and non-Western genealogies of art and performance. Despite the international visibility of Kazakh equestrian circus groups such as “Nomad Stunts,” there is a lack of systematic cultural-philosophical analysis of how horse art evolved from a ritual-practical function into a codified aesthetic system and national symbol.

Object, Goal, Methods, and Research Materials

The object of this research is the equestrian circus art of Kazakhstan, and its subject is the cultural-philosophical conditions under which this genre emerged and evolved from horse domestication to modern-day performance. The aim of the study is to demonstrate that horse circus art in Kazakhstan constitutes a unique form of embodied cultural knowledge shaped by nomadic values, spatial mobility, and symbolic ritual. The research addresses this aim through a multidisciplinary approach, combining

historical-cultural analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, and comparative performance studies. The methodological basis includes qualitative analysis of archaeological records (e.g., Botai excavations), ethnographic data, written chronicles (Dulati, 1999; Yanushkevich, 1979), and visual-performance artifacts. Archival materials and existing classifications of national equestrian games are used to trace cultural continuities from everyday practices to staged performances. The research is interpretive in nature and grounded in cultural studies logic. The hypothesis is that the domestication of the horse functioned as a cultural act with performative implications that ultimately shaped the development of circus genres in Kazakh tradition. The materials studied include both historical data (archaeological, textual) and cultural products (games, performances), presented qualitatively with reference to their frequency, symbolic significance, and evolution.

Literature review

Domestication of the Horse in the Eurasian Steppe. The domestication of the horse has been a pivotal subject in understanding human cultural evolution. Recent studies have provided nuanced perspectives on this process. Outram (2023) posits that horse domestication was a multi-centered, multi-stage process, emphasizing the role of specialized Eneolithic horse pastoralism in developing human-equine relationships. This challenges earlier models that suggested a singular origin, highlighting the complexity of domestication across different regions.

Taylor (2024) revisits the narrative of horse domestication, suggesting that the initial domestication events may have been more complex and regionally varied than previously thought. This aligns with findings from Librado et al. (2024), who, through extensive genetic analyses, propose that widespread horse-based mobility arose around 2200 BCE in Eurasia, indicating a significant shift in human-horse interactions during this period.

Botai Culture and Early Horse Domestication. The Botai culture of northern Kazakhstan has been central to discussions of early horse domestication. While earlier studies identified Botai as the earliest site of horse domestication, recent critiques suggest a more complex scenario. Taylor and Barrón-Ortiz (2021) argue that evidence from Botai reflects intensive exploitation of wild horses, possibly involving management or herding, but not full domestication as seen in later societies. This perspective is further

explored by Niskanen (2023), who examines the prehistoric origins of domestic horses and horseback riding, suggesting that while Botai played a significant role, it represents just one part of a broader, multifaceted domestication process.

Equestrian Traditions in Central Asia. The equestrian traditions of Central Asia have garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly concerning their cultural and artistic expressions. The World Nomad Games, as reported by Abuova (2024), serve as a contemporary platform showcasing traditional equestrian skills, reflecting the enduring legacy of nomadic horse culture in the region. Furthermore, Andreeva (2024) explores the transmission of animal-style art motifs across regions, highlighting the role of nomadic societies in shaping artistic traditions from China to Crimea. These studies underscore the deep interconnection between equestrian practices and cultural identity in Central Asia.

Understanding the development of horse breeding and management offers insights into the evolution of human-animal relationships. Klecel and Martyniuk (2021) provide a comprehensive review tracing the progression of horse breeding from the Eurasian steppes to Roman circuses, emphasizing the significance of selective breeding practices in shaping equine characteristics suited for various cultural needs. Their work highlights the continuity and adaptation of horse management techniques over millennia.

Archaeological findings have been instrumental in understanding the evolution of equestrian equipment among nomadic cultures. Tkačenko (2010) examines the development of riding tack among cattle-breeders in Central Asia and Southern Siberia during the first and second millennia CE, revealing a progression in design that reflects broader socio-cultural transformations. These insights provide a tangible link between material culture and the evolving practices of horsemanship in nomadic societies.

Materials and methods

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that brings together cultural history, archaeology, ethnography, and performance studies. The study employs historical-comparative analysis to trace the cultural trajectory of horse domestication and its transformation into performative traditions within the Kazakh Steppe. Archival materials, archaeological findings (primarily from the Botai settlement), and historical texts such as those of M.Kh. Dulati (1999), A. Yanushkevich (1979),

and others provide the empirical foundation for analyzing cultural shifts. Ethnographic descriptions and oral narratives were also consulted to understand the symbolic and ritual aspects of horsemanship in nomadic society. The research further integrates hermeneutic and semiotic approaches to examine how traditional equestrian practices evolved into codified performance genres, such as national equestrian games and circus acts.

The methodological process consisted of three phases. First, descriptive-historical reconstruction was used to outline the early domestication of horses and its material evidence. Second, content analysis was applied to both historical texts and visual-cultural data (including representations of equestrian games and circus performances) to identify recurring motifs and symbols. Finally, a comparative cultural analysis was conducted to explore how Kazakh equestrian practices align or diverge from similar traditions in other Eurasian cultures. The selected materials were evaluated in both qualitative and contextual terms, with special attention to their cultural function, ritual dimension, and philosophical significance. This triangulated method enhances the reliability of the conclusions and reveals deeper insights into the performative and symbolic nature of horse culture in Kazakh society.

Discussion and results

1. The Origins of Horse Domestication in the Kazakh Steppe

The domestication of the horse represents one of the most transformative innovations in human history. Alongside fire and metallurgy, it revolutionized mobility, warfare, pastoral economies, and cultural imagination. Yet few regions can claim such direct and material ties to this historical process as the Kazakh Steppe. It was here, in the northern expanses of modern-day Kazakhstan, that early nomadic communities first began systematically taming the tarpan – the Eurasian wild horse – during the Neolithic period, around 3500–3000 BCE. The Botai culture, centered around the settlement of the same name in the Aiyrtau district of North Kazakhstan, now stands internationally recognized as the cradle of horse domestication (Levine, 1999; Outram et al., 2009).

Archaeological discoveries at Botai have yielded compelling evidence that horses were not only corralled but actively used for riding and dairying. Finds include horse jawbones with bit wear, implying riding or at least bridling; faunal remains

suggesting dietary consumption; and the presence of mare's milk residue in pottery – suggesting the earliest known use of fermented horse milk, kumys, a product still central to Kazakh cultural identity (Outram et al., 2009; Anthony, 2008; Mursalimova, 2016). As archaeologist Alan Outram notes, this represents not merely an economic development but a deep shift in the relationship between humans and animals – an ontological and spatial reconfiguration of life on the steppe.

Recent genetic research has complicated earlier assumptions. For a long time, scholars believed that modern domestic horses (*Equus caballus*) directly descended from the Botai lineage. However, studies published in *Nature* and *Science* over the past five years (Gaunitz et al., 2018; Librado et al., 2021) have clarified that the Botai horses are in fact more closely related to the Przewalski's horse, and not the primary progenitors of modern domestic breeds. Nonetheless, this finding does not diminish the significance of the Botai culture; rather, it reveals that horse domestication was a polycentric, nonlinear process. As Taylor (2021) and Outram (2023) argue, the Botai still represent the earliest known horse-dependent society – the first community to shape a pastoralist culture, economy, and ritual life around the horse.

This distinction matters greatly in cultural terms. Botai may not have produced the global domestic horse lineage, but they did produce a cultural model of what horse-based life looks like: daily mobility, long-distance herding, dairy consumption, communal rituals centered on horses, and a rich symbolic ecology. The Kazakh proverb “Raised thousands of horses – Arka is a master of horsemanship” (Toqtabai, 2010) echoes this civilizational awareness of mastery and harmony with nature.

The role of Botai in scholarly and public discourse has only grown since Kazakhstan's independence. International research teams, exhibitions (e.g., the 1994 Botai show at the University of Cambridge), and conferences like the 1995 “First Horsemen of Eurasia” symposium have solidified Botai's place in the global narrative of domestication (Kulbayev, 2021). Today, Botai is frequently cited not only in archaeology but also in cultural heritage discussions, including UNESCO and World Nomad Games publications, as the foundational source of nomadic horse culture.

Kazakh scholars have long emphasized the philosophical dimension of this breakthrough. Toqtabai (2010) and Jetibaev (2011) argue that horse domestication brought about not just new technologies but

a new moral economy – one in which humans and animals coexist as partners in survival. The horse becomes not only an economic asset or means of travel, but an extension of the body, an object of reverence, and a locus of aesthetic expression. This is especially apparent in how Kazakh traditional thought merges utilitarian function with symbolic respect: the horse is not beaten; the rope (quryq) is never stepped over; the saddle is not sold separately; and the mare is milked with ritual precision. These taboos represent a system of ethics as much as tradition – a system born at the threshold of domestication.

The cultural continuity between Botai-era practices and present-day Kazakh traditions is also observable in dietary customs. Kumys, the fermented milk of mares, is not only a nutritional staple but a sacred drink in Kazakh culture. Its early presence in Botai vessels (Outram et al., 2009; Anthony, 20087) suggests that the practice has persisted – almost uninterrupted – for over 5,500 years. As Mursalimova (2016) states, kumys is more than a beverage: it is an anchor of national taste, memory, and ritual. The fact that Kazakh children are taught to taste kumys-muryndyk (the ‘first kumys of spring’) during seasonal rites further underscores this link between pre-historic innovation and contemporary identity.

Moreover, the domestication of the horse is increasingly viewed as a driver of cultural complexity. As Dulati (1999) recorded in his *Tarih-i Rashidi*, Kasym Khan claimed: “Our most valuable possession is the horse; our most delicious food is its meat; and our most precious drink is its milk.” This civilizational triad – food, drink, mobility – constructed a holistic worldview where economic, spiritual, and artistic practices orbit around the horse.

Ethnographic testimony supports this continuity. Polish exile A. Yanushkevich, writing in the 19th century, observed that Kazakhs respected horses as much as they did elders, and even refused to ride a horse into town without washing it – a gesture of dignity and respect (Yanushkevich, 1979). Russian ethnographer Kalachev (1859) echoed this sentiment, noting that “there is nothing more important to a Kazakh than his horse – not land, not gold, not even family.”

In conclusion, the domestication of the horse in the Kazakh Steppe – first pioneered by the Botai and later elaborated through centuries of nomadic adaptation – must be seen as a foundational cultural and philosophical event. It marked the beginning not only of horsemanship but of a broader performative and symbolic culture that would shape Kazakh identity to this day.

From the gallop of the tarpan to the choreography of shabandozdyq (dzhigitovka), this legacy gallops forward – a living testament to the creative alliance between human and horse.

2. From Ritual to Performance: Horse Culture and Equestrian Art in Kazakh Tradition

The domestication of the horse in the Kazakh Steppe not only revolutionized transportation and warfare but also deeply influenced the cultural and spiritual life of the Kazakh people. Horses became central to rituals, social customs, and artistic expressions, reflecting a profound bond between humans and these majestic animals.

In Kazakh culture, horses are revered not merely as beasts of burden but as sacred beings intertwined with human destiny. This reverence is evident in various rituals and taboos: stepping over a horse’s bridle is considered disrespectful, and specific ceremonies are performed when a horse is born or passes away. Such practices underscore the spiritual connection between Kazakhs and their horses, viewing them as partners in both daily life and the metaphysical realm.

The mythical Tulpar, a winged horse in Turkic folklore, symbolizes speed, freedom, and nobility. Depictions of Tulpar adorn national emblems and literature, reinforcing the horse’s emblematic status in Kazakh identity. This mythological figure embodies the ideal qualities aspired to by Kazakh warriors and serves as a cultural touchstone linking past traditions with contemporary values (Bastamitova et al, 2023).

Traditional equestrian games in Kazakhstan are more than mere sports; they are performative rituals that encapsulate historical narratives, social values, and communal bonds. These games, often held during festivals and significant life events, serve as living reenactments of ancestral practices and are integral to preserving cultural heritage (Akazhanova et.al 2019).

Kokpar, for instance, is a vigorous team game where riders vie to place a goat carcass in the opponent’s goal. This game, rooted in ancient hunting traditions, showcases not only physical prowess but also strategic teamwork and horsemanship (Boast, 2017). It remains a popular spectacle during national celebrations, drawing large audiences and fostering community spirit.

Baiga, a long-distance horse race, tests the endurance of both horse and rider. Historically, it served as a means to identify the strongest horses for warfare and herding. Today, Baiga races are central features of festivals, symbolizing the enduring im-

portance of stamina and resilience in Kazakh culture (Akazhanova et.al 2019).

Kyz Kuu, translating to ‘Catch the Girl,’ is a playful yet competitive game where a male rider attempts to catch a female rider to earn a kiss, while failure results in the woman chasing and whipping the man (Baizakova et al, 2018). This game reflects themes of courtship, gender dynamics, and the valorization of equestrian skill, blending humor with cultural commentary.

Tenge Ilu, or “Picking up Coins,” involves riders collecting coins from the ground at full gallop, demonstrating agility and precision (Akazhanova et.al 2019). Originating as a training exercise for warriors, it has evolved into a popular performance that highlights the dexterity of Kazakh riders.

The intrinsic theatricality of these equestrian games naturally lent itself to the development of circus arts in Kazakhstan. As these traditional games were formalized and presented to broader audiences, they retained their cultural essence while adopting elements of performance art.

The Kazakh State Circus, established in the 20th century, became a platform where traditional equestrian skills were showcased in choreographed routines, blending acrobatics, music, and storytelling. Troupes like “Nomad Stunts” have gained international acclaim by performing acts rooted in Kazakh equestrian traditions, such as the daring ‘Rider Guys’ (Shabandoz zhigitter) routine, which involves complex stunts performed on galloping horses.

These performances serve not only as entertainment but also as cultural preservation, educating audiences about Kazakh history and values through dynamic displays of horsemanship. The incorporation of traditional games into circus acts ensures that these cultural practices remain vibrant and relevant in contemporary society.

Kazakhstan’s commitment to preserving and promoting its equestrian heritage has garnered international recognition. Events like the World Nomad Games celebrate traditional sports, including equestrian competitions, drawing participants and

spectators from around the globe. These platforms highlight the universal appeal of Kazakh equestrian traditions and their significance in the global cultural landscape.

Moreover, organizations like UNESCO have acknowledged the importance of these traditions (Nurgali & Rakhymova 2024). For instance, the inclusion of Kazakh equestrian games in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity underscores their value as living traditions that contribute to cultural diversity and human creativity.

3. From the Steppe Arena to the Global Stage: Kazakh Circus and the Modernization of Equestrian Performance

The transition from nomadic ritual and sport to professionalized equestrian performance in the circus marks a critical moment in the cultural modernization of Kazakh horse traditions. This transformation, while grounded in centuries-old practices such as audaryspaq, kokpar, and tenge ilu, emerged in new institutional settings in the 20th century, notably in the form of stationary circuses and government-supported troupes. Rather than diminishing the authenticity of the tradition, this shift allowed Kazakh equestrian arts to enter global circuits of recognition, performance, and competition.

The roots of Kazakh circus arts are visible in the ways equestrian games emphasize timing, risk, strength, and community coordination. These qualities were perfectly suited for adaptation to circus performance, which also values spectacle, storytelling, and embodied discipline. Many of the stunts and sequences developed in the Kazakh State Circus directly borrow from the choreography of national games, transforming them into refined artistic compositions. This continuity is not coincidental – as scholars such as Dosbatyrov (2012) and Kamalashuly (2013) observe, the line between ritual, sport, and performance in Central Asian nomadic culture has always been blurred.

To highlight this connection, Table 1 illustrates how specific national games evolved into iconic circus acts:

Table 1 – Elements of Kazakh national games used as circus tricks

| Ordinal number | The name of the national game | Circus trick |
|----------------|-------------------------------|--|
| | Alaman baige | Recreated as endurance riding demonstrations |
| | Kokpar game | Adapted into choreographed competitive riding |
| | Audaryspaq | Wrestled performances in controlled arena settings |
| | Tenge ilu | Transformed into dramatic coin-snatching routines |

Continuation of the table

| Ordinal number | The name of the national game | Circus trick |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---|
| | Kyz kuu | Incorporated into stylized pursuit acts |
| | Archery | Performed on horseback in timed sequences |
| | Kazakh kuresi | Displayed as strength acts within circus interludes |
| | Qamshy uru | Developed into rhythmic whip performances |
| | Shalma salu | Demonstrated through taming stunts and rope tricks |

The Kazakh State Circus played a leading role in institutionalizing this cultural adaptation. From the mid-20th century onward, it developed a repertoire that seamlessly integrated traditional Kazakh equestrian skills with modern circus aesthetics. Costumes, musical accompaniment (dombra, kui), and narrative themes reinforced the historical and cultural resonance of these acts. Crucially, the performers were often trained not just as athletes but as cultural interpreters – embodying a living archive of the Steppe’s intangible heritage.

One of the most successful ambassadors of this tradition is the Nomad Stunts¹ troupe, founded in the 2000s by Zhaidarbek Kungozhinov. As a direct inheritor of nomadic horse culture, Nomad Stunts merged acrobatic technique with ritual symbolism, showcasing spectacular feats of horsemanship across the globe. Their iconic trick, known as “Going under two horses” – where a rider slides between two galloping horses – remains unmatched internationally. Other standout performances include simultaneous vaulting, synchronized formations, and combat reenactments drawn from Steppe military traditions.

Nomad Stunt’s participation in global festivals has earned them multiple awards:

- Silver Lion at the International Circus Festival in China (1993);
- Bronze Lion at the International Equestrian Acrobatics Festival (2001);
- Golden Bear at the European International Festival of Acrobatics (2007);
- Taurus World Stunt Award nomination for Best Action in a Foreign Film for *Tomiris* (2020) – Considered the “Stuntman’s Oscar”.

These honors reflect not only the group’s technical mastery but also their ability to preserve and globalize Kazakh intangible heritage. Their perfor-

mances have graced international stages from China to France, Italy, Ukraine, and Russia, making them cultural diplomats as much as artists.

Zhaidarbek Kungozhinov and Nomad Stunts continue to operate at the intersection of heritage and innovation, inspiring younger generations of Kazakh performers while promoting an indigenous philosophy of performance where the horse is a sacred partner, not a stage prop. Their success proves that equestrian art from the Kazakh Steppe, deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom, has become a globally respected and recognized expression of cultural power, creativity, and endurance (Aljanova et al. 2025).

Kazakh equestrian performance as a distinct genre within the broader field of global circus arts. Equally important is the philosophy embedded in these performances. In contrast to the often spectacle-driven approach of European circus traditions, Kazakh horse acts retain a spiritual dimension – honoring the animal, preserving the ethos of harmony, and emphasizing balance over domination. As Kungozhinov himself stated in an interview, “Our horses are not props; they are co-performers with memory, soul, and instinct.” (Aljanova et al. 2025).

Today, the legacy of equestrian performance in Kazakhstan continues to evolve. Government programs supporting the preservation of intangible heritage, regional equestrian schools, and participation in international events like the World Nomad Games ensure that younger generations are not only trained in the physical aspects of horsemanship but also in the cultural values it represents. The inclusion of Kazakh equestrian customs in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 and 2021 further confirms the global relevance of this tradition (Nurgali and Rakhymova, 2024).

The adaptation of Kazakh equestrian traditions into modern circus performance represents more than just a stylistic transition – it is a cultural renaissance. The nomadic values of freedom, mastery, and

¹ <https://nomadstunts.com/en/> Nomad Stunts is an International Action Company, established in 2000 by the Taurus World Stunt Awards Winner, Stunt coordinator, Stunt performer, Honored Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Zhaidarbek Kunguzhinov

unity with nature continue to thrive on the global stage, demonstrating that what began as daily practice and seasonal ritual can now speak to universal audiences through the language of movement, rhythm, and courage.

Conclusion

The classical equestrian circus, widely credited as emerging from the professional equestrian schools of 16th-17th century Europe, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the much older culturogenesis of horse-based performance in the Kazakh Steppe. Archaeological discoveries at the Botai settlement – dating back over 6,000 years to the Eneolithic era – confirm that the nomads of Central Asia were the first to tame wild horses, ride them, and integrate them into every aspect of their livelihood and spiritual life. Before the 20th-century sedentarization policies disrupted this way of life, the nomadic economic system of the Steppe was built entirely around horses. The horse shaped not only mobility and material production but also cosmology, aesthetics, and philosophical

conceptions of freedom and balance. In this context, horsemanship was not merely a skill – it was a worldview.

Four interconnected aspects – economic utility, military mobility, ritual significance, and performative artistry – have long defined the cultural centrality of the horse in Kazakh civilization. Whether through transporting goods, organizing cavalry, honoring ancestral spirits, or executing breathtaking dzhigitovka stunts, the horse has remained both a practical companion and a symbolic cornerstone. These traditions are not relics of the past, but living practices that have evolved into modern expressions such as the Kazakh State Circus and the globally acclaimed Nomad Stunts troupe. The Kazakh contribution to equestrian circus art is thus not derivative of Western models, but deeply original and foundational. Recognizing the Steppe as a birthplace of performative horse culture allows for a necessary rethinking of circus history – one that positions Kazakhstan as a civilizational actor in the development of artistic and cultural expressions rooted in interspecies harmony, ritual endurance, and nomadic ingenuity.

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