

Research Article/Araştırma Makalesi

**Traditional Sports and Games among Central Asia's
Turkic Muslim Peoples, 1400 to 1850 AD: Training,
Hunting, and Festivals**

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Abstract

Traditional sports and recreation in Central Asia are deep-rooted and ancient. The Central Asian Turkic people participated in physical culture for different reasons; horse races, wrestling, archery, and hunting had combat training elements—while fairs, circuses, and home entertainments allowed people to be distracted from everyday issues. Sports and leisure events helped social interaction and family bonding during seasonal festivals and Islamic holidays. Indeed, the following study shows that particular sports were permissible in the Islamic tradition. This descriptive essay contains three parts: (i) concepts and definitions; (ii) traditional and folk sports, hunting, and recreational pastimes; and (iii) traditional sites of sports places among the nomad and oasis societies. The focus is the majority-Muslim Turkic and Iranian-Persian peoples of the lands and societies that modern-day scholars label as

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'Central Asia'. The historical sweep from 1400 to 1850AD covers the era when Muslim dynasties, tribal leaders, and communities had long-established regional control, influencing cultural construction (despite an increasing Russian presence since 1731AD on the Kazakh and Kyrgyz steppe lands). The paper will outline more than twenty-five different historic sports and leisure pastimes among Turkic and Persian Central Asians.

Keywords: *Central Asia, folk, games, traditional sport, Turkic culture.*

Orta Asya'nın Müslüman Türk Halkları Arasında Geleneksel Sporlar ve Oyunlar, M.S. 1400-1850: Eğitim, Avcılık ve Festivaller

Öz

Orta Asya'da geleneksel spor ve rekreasyon aktivitelerinin tarihi oldukça köklü ve eskidir. Orta Asya'da Türkler fiziksel etkinliklere bir çok nedenle katılırlardı. At yarışları, güreş, okçuluk ve avcılık savaş eğitiminin; şöenler, sirk ve ev çevresinde yapılan eğlenceler ise gündelik yaşamlarının bir parçası olarak görüldü. Dini bayramlar ve milli-kültürel günlerde katıldıkları spor ve hobi etkinlikleri sosyal etkileşimi ve aile bağlarını güçlendirirdi. Bu çalışma, İslam geleneğinin bazı spor türleri ile barışık olduğunu göstermektedir. Saha açısından tanımlayıcı özellikler taşıyan bu makale üç temel bölümden oluşmaktadır: I. Kavramlar ve tanımlar. II. Geleneksel ve kültürel sporlar, av ve eğlenceler. III. Göçebe ve vaha topluluklarında geleneksel spor alanları. Çalışmanın odak noktasını çağdaş bilim insanlarının Orta Asya toplulukları olarak tarif ettiği Türk- Müslüman ve İranlı topluluklar oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın tarihsel anlamda kapsamı 1400-1850 yılları arasında Kazak ve Bozkır topraklarında 1731 sonrası artan Rus baskısına rağmen Müslüman hanedanların ve kabile liderlerinin bir kültür inşa etmeyi bölgeyi kontrol altında tutmayı başardıkları dönemi içine almaktadır. Bu makalede Türk ve İranlı Orta Asyalıların hayatlarında yer etmiş yirmi beş dolayında spor ve eğlence aktivitesi incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Asya, halk, oyunlar, geleneksel spor, Türk kültürü.

Introduction

The image of the Central Asian traditional sports between 1400 and 1850AD conjures up the horse race, archery, wrestling, polo, falconry, and recreation associated with community events and home life. Traditional sports and spectators were part of the cultural landscape for

the rural, nomadic and sedentary oasis societies at times of communal celebration and Islamic holidays. The following study discusses folk and traditional sports, hunting and recreation among Turkic Muslim Central Asians. The aim is not to romanticise traditional sports but to describe the diversity of Central Asian games and physical culture.

During the period under review, Islam had established itself as Central Asia's majority religion. Its Islamic tradition says that specific sports and leisure were beneficial to Muslims. The early Islamic tradition provides the paper with a contextual framework to understand why a society encouraged running, swimming, and horse riding. However, I am not trying to claim these sports are intrinsically Islamic; instead, the Islamic tradition says they are permissible. Indeed, the practice of physical culture predates the development of Islam in Central Asia. Due to the paper's Turkic and Muslim focus, the physical culture of non-Turkic and non-Muslim groups will not form part of the analysis. In addition, the paper does not explore Central Asian music, dance, theatre, and puppetry.

The study will focus on male Central Asians as sports participants because available English-language literature discusses this gender almost exclusively. Despite bias in the sources, several horse races highlighted in this work involved women as riders and competitors. So, due to the nature of the published literature, the paper presents a working account of physical exercise, games, male initiation rites, and festival culture rites.¹ Central Asian women and sport from medieval times to the mid-nineteenth century is a much-needed research paper. In order to complete this research, Turkic and Russian language skills are required to visit Central Asian and Moscow archives. However, there

¹ See Alexey.V. Kylasov, 'Traditional Sports and Games along the Silk Roads', *International Journal of Ethnosport and Traditional Games* 1 (2019), 1–10. Kylasov writes about the construction of cultural memory and the marginalisation of women's games: 'It is important to note that women's games did not have the same social meanings that men's competitions were endowed with and therefore cannot be considered (as a rule) in the context of public social practices. Women's games were part of leisure, they are determined by the nowadays culture, while men's competitions were organized exclusively within the framework of holidays, and therefore they were part of a festive culture — initiation rites in the universe of primordial tradition, as defined by René Guenon', 3.

is evidence of women and physical exercise in early Islam. Notably, in the Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad and his wife Aisha used to run and race together.² In the case of Central Asian sports spectators and leisure, whether in the privacy of the home or public, the secondary sources reveal that men and women, old and young, enjoyed viewing physical culture. To compensate for the gender focus of the paper, highlighted is the role of the Muslim Gypsy-Roma minority in traditional recreation (an ethnic group with Indian heritage). This community have been less researched in the Central Asian English language literature.

The analyses follow in three parts. The first part is background information summarising the ethnicity and culture and the environment of the Turkic (and Iranian-Persian) Central Asians.³ The paper's contextual framework outlines early Islamic traditions about physical culture, sport and recreation. The second part explores more than twenty-five traditional sports and leisure pursuits, covering: the region's horse culture, two versions of polo, *kupari*, horse racing (and gender); archery; three types of hunting (the hunting party, falconry, and skiing hunters); running races; walking races; wrestling; animal blood sports; and everyday country sports. Finally, the third part reviews the connection between traditional sports and celebrations, folk festivals, and Islamic holidays, including women's home entertainment, Gypsy/Roma artistic performers, and teahouse board games.

Who are the Central Asians?: conceptualising their traditional sport

This part outlines the background detail about Central Asia, covering concepts and definitions associated with the major ethnic groups and

² _____ 'Bringing Both Sides Together: Traditional Sports and Games: A Tool for Intercultural Learning', EuroMed Youth Educational Report; Salto-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre, 2011, <https://www.salto-youth.net/euromed>, 32; see also Chapter: 'Regarding foot races', Narrator Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin, Sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:2578> (accessed 7 Feb 2022).

³ A fuller account of the Persian-Iranian traditional sports legacy in Central Asia can be found in the comprehensively researched paper by Zubaidullo Ubaidulloev, 'The History and Characteristics of Traditional Sports in Central Asia: Tajikistan', *The Bulletin of the Faculty of Health and Sport Sciences*, 38 (March 2015), 4-58.

the region generally, oasis and nomadic/migratory communities, sports terminology, and early Islamic tradition about physical exercise.

Central Asia is historically diverse in cultures, tribal identities, religions, and races. 'Central Asia' is a modern concept that scholars see encompassing the territory of the five independent, post-Soviet republics: the five 'Stans'; though, in this paper, it means the geographic area and peoples and communities living there circa 1400 to 1850AD—and their sports and recreation. This paper uses 'Central Asia' to label the region's past for analytical purposes, though other authors prefer Turan, Turkestan, Middle Asia, or Eurasia.⁴

The region's major ethnic groups are the Tajiks (Iranian-Persian speaking) and the Turkic peoples: Uzbeks, Turkomans, Kyrgyz, Karakalpaks, and the Kazaks. Minority groups include the Tatars, Arabs, Jews, Slavs, Uyghurs, Dungans, Mongols, Kurds, and Indians. John Lawton notes that:

'Turkic peoples, in fact, are one of the most widespread ethnic groups in the world, inhabiting a vast region from the Great Wall of China in the east to the Balkans in the west, and from Siberia in the north to Afghanistan in the south.'⁵

The study of Central Asia's ethnic groups is well-researched in the literature.⁶ However, one minority less studied are the region's Gypsies/Roma. The Central Asian Gypsy/Roma minority (*Luli* or *Chugi*) were travelling entertainers—and producers of handmade metal and craft goods. Many adopted the Islamic faith (infused with traditional practices). One group resided in what has become today's Tajikistan and eastern Uzbekistan. Their economy was precarious, making money from entertaining at weddings and family celebrations in the villages, urban bazaars, and Mountain-Tajik settlements (*kishlak*, *qishloq*). Their language abilities included both Tajik-Persian and Uzbek-Turkic. (The

⁴ Sevet Akyildiz and Richard Carlson, *Social and Cultural Change in Central Asia: The Soviet Legacy*, London: Routledge, 2014, 5.

⁵ John Lawton, 'The Cradle of the Turks', *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199402/the.cradle.of.the.turks.htm>, 45, no. 2 (March/April 1994), 2-11.

⁶ See Shirin Akiner, *Islamic People of the Soviet Union*, London: Kegan Paul, 1983; Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Soviet census of 1926 reports approximately 5,000 Gypsies/Roma in the region, probably an underestimate because some declared themselves 'Tajik' or 'Uzbek'.⁷ This paper highlights the Gypsy/Roma community because of their marginalisation and historical forced subordination to other ethnicities across Eurasia.

Islam was by 1400AD the majority religion in Central Asia. Islamisation of Central Asia commenced in stages from 650 to 700AD (Arab expansion), 720 to 800AD (Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties), 821 to 999AD (Tahirid emirate and Samanid emirate), and 960 and 1350AD (the conversion of the Turkic tribes). During the Islamisation periods, the political power shifted between different dynasties; indeed, the region has had many rulers and invasions.⁸ As new powers emerged, the numerous ethnic groups, tribes, and oasis societies adapted to a changing political and cultural landscape.⁹ It included absorbing new cultural practices like certain sports and leisure pursuits.

On three occasions, 'Central Asia' has been unified politically, all being authoritarian-type regimes: Genghis Khan (d.1227AD), Timur (d.1405AD), and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1917-1991AD). Nonetheless, the region in history has been a cultural area, not a political one. Vincent Fourniau says:

'Central Asia was never united as a unique political entity, but its sub-regions were linked by interdependent dynamics, that moulded it together like autonomous political and cultural area in the past, a unity in diversity, so to speak.'¹⁰

⁷ Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians Under Russian Rule: A Study in Culture Change*, Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 1980, 23.

⁸ Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*, London: Kegan Paul, 1983, 4-10.

⁹ Azade-Ayse Rorlich's statement helps us understand how different peoples adapted and adopted Islam and the Turkic language forms. Azade-Ayse Rorlich explains how culture is subject to change: '*No culture enjoys a perfect integration or a static equilibrium of its component traits. The diffusion of features of culture is a constant and crucial dynamic process*'. Source: Azade-Ayse Rorlich, 'Acculturation in Tatarstan: The Case of the Sabantui Festival', *Slavic Review* 41, no 2, (1982), 316-321, 1.

¹⁰ Vincent Fourniau, 'Early Modern Interactions between Pastoral Nomadic and Sedentary Societies in the Central Asian Culture Complex', in *The European Handbook of Central Asian Studies History, Politics, and Societies*, ed. Jeroen Van den Bosch, Adrien Fauve, Bruno De Cordier, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021, 161.

Though by 1200AD, Islam and the majority-Turkic ethnicity and language enabled most Central Asians to share cultural traits, the oasis peoples and the nomads' economies and societal codes differed.¹¹ Shirin Akiner says:

'Two distinct cultural spheres have co-existed in Central Asia since the earliest times: that of the nomads and that of the settled peoples... Some of the nomads began to adopt a settled way of life in the nineteenth century.'¹²

Fourniau gives a similar account, explaining that Central Asian pastoral nomadic and sedentary oases cultures existed separately, yet, points of contact emerged.¹³ Furthermore,

'The interactions between pastoral nomadic and sedentary societies form the foundation of the Central Asian culture complex... these interactions structured not only its economy, but also its cultural life, as well as the various native representations of identity.'¹⁴

The analysis below shows that traditional sports were popular among the oasis and nomadic peoples, but the former organised the events like fairs, house parties, news delivery runners, and competitions between falconers or polo teams. While the latter specialised in horse skills, hunting and archery.

'Sport' in this paper is '*a form of human activity (sometimes combined with a physical contribution from animals or using vehicles or various devices), the outcome of which is determined by the physical rather than the intellectual effort*'.¹⁵ At the core of sport are recreation and a competitive game between individuals or teams of players. Whether structured or unstructured, a 'game' is a '*recreational activity*

¹¹ Shirin Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?* London: Whitehall Paper Series, 1993, 5.

¹² Akiner, *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?*, 5.

¹³ Fourniau, 'Early Modern Interactions', 117, 127.

¹⁴ Fourniau, 'Early Modern Interactions', 119. In the same book, Fourniau says: '*Central Asia was never united as a unique political entity, but its sub-regions were linked by interdependent dynamics, that moulded it together like autonomous political and cultural area in the past, a unity in diversity, so to speak*, 161.

¹⁵ _____ 'Bringing Both Sides Together: Traditional Sports and Games: A Tool for Intercultural Learning', EuroMed Youth Educational Report; Salto-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre, 2011, <https://www.salto-youth.net/euromed>, 7.

that requires physical skill, strategy or luck or a combination of all three and has rules accepted by all participants'. It involves mental and physical elements, or both, and 'goals, rules, challenges, and interaction'.¹⁶ A 'blood sport' is 'any sport that involves animals being killed or hurt to make people watching or taking part feel excitement'. This paper comments on hunting, dogfighting, and cockfighting and ram fighting (also known as sheep fighting).¹⁷

For this essay, 'tradition' means: '*... a story or a custom that is memorized and passed down from generation to generation, originally without the need for a writing system (oral tradition)*'.¹⁸ Traditions, though culturally important, might be created in time or invented. 'Traditional sports', recreation and games '*can form the backbone of a community*' and '*further community spirit, bring people together and generate a sense of pride in a society's cultural roots*'; they are '*expressions of indigenous cultures and ways of life*'.¹⁹ Traditional sports' organisation was not highly codified and controlled like modern sports, so local expression influenced proceedings. Local knowledge and memory informed traditional sports culture, making oral tradition as important as written codes. Francesca Berti and Valentina Zingari notes, '*Games and toys existing before the industrial revolution (circa mid-18th century) are, usually, indicated as "traditional games"*'.²⁰ 'Culture' refers to '*a series of values, attitudes, beliefs and ways of behaviour that a group of people hold in common*'.²¹

¹⁶ Roland Renson and Herman Smulders, 'Research Methods and Development of the Flemish Folk Games File', *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 16, no. 1 (March 1981), 97-107, cited in *Bringing Both Sides Together*, 7-8.

¹⁷ Cambridge Dictionary.org, 'Blood sport', <https://www.dictionary.cambridge.org> (accessed 20 Jan 2022).

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁰ Francesca Berti and Valentina Lapicciarella Zingari, 'Between Similarities and Cultural Diversities: Intangible Cultural Heritage Meets Intercultural Education. The Example of Traditional Sports and Games', *Governance, Values, Work and Future*, 3, Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica, Education And Post-Democracy (6-8 June 2019, Cagliari, Italy), 71.

²¹ Cambridge Dictionary.org, 'Blood sport', <https://www.dictionary.cambridge.org> (accessed 20 Jan 2022), 9.

The philosophy of 'Islamic sport' originates from the Qur'an and the custom, traditions, sayings and practices (*Sunnah*) of Prophet Muhammad and the *Sahaba* (the Prophet's friends). These sources say physical exercise benefits the individual and group's development and is 'a way of keeping busy and fine-tuning behaviour. The teachings of the Prophet on the interest of strengthening the body and keeping it truly healthy stated that physical education contributes to building a sound body'.²² Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter note that some Muslim jurists say 'that a Muslim is required to practice sports in order to maintain a strong and healthy body'; these jurists cite one of Muhammad's sayings linking religious devotion with physical strength: 'a strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than a weak one'.²³ The outcome is that a healthier individual, in mind and body, is better prepared to work productively for their family needs and the wider society. The particular sports mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad are swimming, archery, horseback riding, running, walking, and wrestling.²⁴ 'The mention of sports in Prophetic traditions serves to legitimize them', say Shavit and Winter. Their research shows that other sports played by the early Muslims were weightlifting, fencing and the high jump.²⁵

²² _____ 'Bringing Both Sides Together: Traditional Sports and Games: A Tool for Intercultural Learning', EuroMed Youth Educational Report; Salto-Youth EuroMed Resource Centre, 2011, <https://www.salto-youth.net/euomed>, 32.

²³ Sheikh 'Atiyah Saqr, former Head of Al-Azhar Fatwa Committee (June 8, 2006): 'Sports Practiced by Early Muslims', https://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1149429765828, cited in Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter, 'Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law', *Islamic Law and Society*, 2011, 18, no. 2 (2011), 263. See also 'How Does Islam View Sports', *islamonline.net*, <https://fiqh.islamonline.net/en/how-does-islam-view-sports/> (accessed 7 Feb 2022).

²⁴ Shavit and Winter, *Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law*, 263; *Bringing Both Sides Together*, 32-33.

²⁵ Shavit and Winter, *Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law*, 264-265; 'In a fatwa issued by a former head of the al-Azhar Fatwa Committee, Sheikh Atiyah Saqr (1914-2006), the mufti stressed that "early Muslims played many forms [types] of sports" such as running, swimming, weight lifting, riding, archery, fencing and high jumping. Saqr quotes one tradition in which the Prophet is reported to have said, "Ride horses, for they are the legacy of your father Isma'il," and another in which Muhammad said, after passing by some people of the tribe of Banu Aslam who were practicing archery, "O children of

Furthermore, viewing sports and games is permissible in Islam; one mainstream jurist explains that Muhammad encouraged Muslims to benefit from leisure, saying: '*for hearts become blind when they are tired*'. In another tradition associated with Muhammad, he '*permitted his Companions to entertain themselves by watching and playing sports*'.²⁶

However, hunting wildlife in the Islamic tradition should be for specific purposes:

'In Islam, hunting for sport is prohibited; Muslims may hunt only by Allah's permission as needed for food. Sport hunting was common during Muhammad's time, and according to companions and relatives, he condemned it.'²⁷ Sira Abdul Rahman comments, 'Generally, the killing of wildlife for any other reasons than food is always prohibited, as is the caging of birds, sports hunting, and animal baiting.'²⁸

Isma'il! Practice archery, as your father Isma'il was a great archer.'" Source: 'Atiyyah Saqr (June 8, 2006): 'Sports Practiced by Early Muslims', *islamonline.net*, https://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1149429765828, cited in Shavit and Winter, 'Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law', 264-265; Ergun Yurdadon's paper 'A Brief Evaluation of Development of Turkish Sport from 1839 to 1923', *The Sport Journal: Sport in Turkey: the Post-Islamic Republican Period* 3 (1988) <https://www.thesportjournal.org/article/sport-in-turkey-the-post-islamic-republican-period> notes, in the Ottoman Empire, before the nineteenth century, sport was organised by wealthy *Agas* and sport *Tekkes* (sports clubs) with one in Istanbul with 300 athletes, mostly wrestlers. The Sultan's Palace was also a site of sports (horse lancers' practice termed *cirit*, and archery) for general amusement., 1, 7.

²⁶ Abdul-Fattah Idrees and 'Isa Zaki 'Isa (June 4, 2006): 'Watching Sport Competitions', *islamonline.net*: https://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=148980358264, cited in Uriya Shavit and Ofir Winter, 'Sports in Contemporary Islamic Law', *Islamic Law and Society*, 2011, 18, no. 2 (2011), 265. See also 'Conditions Binding the Practice of Dangerous Sports', <https://fiqh.islamonline.net/en/conditions-binding-the-practice-of-dangerous-sports/> (accessed 7 Feb 2022); 'Games: What is Lawful and What is Not', <https://fiqh.islamonline.net/en/games-what-is-lawful-and-what-is-not/> (accessed 7 Feb 2022).

²⁷ _____ 'Islam's and the Quran's Views on Animal Welfare', <https://www.learnreligions.com/animal-welfare-2004394> (accessed 7 Feb 2022).

²⁸ Sira Abdul Rahman, 'Religion and Animal Welfare—An Islamic Perspective', *Animals*, 2017, 7, no. 11: 1-6, 2.

Aida Amirova gives an example of one Azeri leader and Sufi who immediately freed the hunted creatures he captured.²⁹

Early Arab Muslim intellectuals debated the benefits of sport, exercise, and leisure pursuits like their counterparts in ancient Greek, Chinese, Tibetan-Buddhist, and Hindu-Indian civilisations. Common themes they investigated include the physical body and keep-fit and well-being, exercise and military training, diet, and children's physical education. Likewise, Central Asian Muslim intellectuals have discussed the connection between physical exercise, education, and moral upbringing. The philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (872-950AD), author of *Virtuous City*, and the physician Abu Ali ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) (980-1037AD), author of the *Canon of Medical Science*, discussed children's physical training, the benefits of rest, adult physical exercise, and general health awareness.³⁰

Traditional and Folk Sports, Hunting, and Recreation

Since ancient times, among the different Central Asian ethnic groups, the urban and oasis dwellers (town-dwellers, settled inhabitants, the *sart*, *ak-sart*), and the rural and migratory (nomadic) communities have participated in a diversity of traditional sport and leisure. The traditional games developed in activities connected with life-cycle rituals, military-physical activity, and strength training for work purposes. Also, it includes men's rites of initiation and group identification (both enable the continuity of traditional games). Many

²⁹ ('"Seven Beauties") an everlasting poem by Nizami Ganjav, the greatest Azerbaijan poet, who lived in 12th century, which tell about hunt and hunting traditions during the reign of Shah Bahram-Gurr. Nizami's "Bahram" is naturally gifted being shapely, handsome, brave and adroit, a skilled rider and hunter. He spends most of his time hunting onagers ("guhrrs"), which is what gave him the alias. However, he hunts not to kill; he brands onagers he has caught and then frees them, so nobody can catch them; as a matter of fact, Bahram hunts to save onagers to implement one of the Sufi statements: there must be harmony between human being and nature.' Source: Aida Amirova, *Patterns of Azerbaijan: Hunting and Fishing*, Azerbaijan: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2009, 5.

³⁰ Edem Ableyev, 'Principles of Physical Training in the Pedagogical Works of Educators from Central Asia', in *Education, Physical Activities and Sport in a Historical Perspective*, ed. Jordi Mones, Barcelona, Spain, 1992, 39-42; see also Yuri Lukashin, 'Folk Games', in *National Folk Sports in the USSR*, ed. Yuri Lukshin, Moscow: Progress Press, 1980, 8.

Central Asian traditional games originated regionally, but intercultural experiences introduced games from other Asian and Eurasian societies. Sevket Akyildiz notes that sports with a *'Eurasian or Asiatic heritage are chess, judo, karate, wrestling, and polo. Some sports like archery and canoeing defy provenance'*.³¹ In particular, Central Asian peoples joined in traditional sports and leisure pursuits during holidays and festivals.

Western academics write about folk sports and leisure during the late nineteenth-century era –when Central Asia was under Russian control – as a time when spectator recreation was common and popular. Writing about Russia and Central Asia, Susan Grant says the peasants *'preferred simple games with simple objectives or entertainment with elements of social interaction.'*³² This statement echoes Elizabeth E. Bacon's study on Central Asia; however, she distinguishes between the settled oases (the townspeople) and the steppe nomads. In the latter case: *'The steppe nomads amused themselves with singing, races, and other diversions in which they actively participate; their only professional entertainers were troubadours who wandered from camp to camp'*.³³ Recreation in the towns and cities (among the oasis people), Bacon reports, *'was largely a spectator variety' with 'entertainment provided by others... from that of watching the behaviour of a foreign traveler or a dogfight to an elaborate program of dancers and other professional entertainers'*. The settled townspeople retained elements of the old nomadic sports. For instance, some Uzbeks enjoyed the recreation of *baiga* (horse races) or equestrian polo.³⁴

The second part of the study explores more than twenty-five traditional sports and games, covering: the region's equestrian culture (two versions of polo, *kupari*, horse racing and riders' gender); archery; three types of hunting (the hunting party, falconry, and skiing hunters);

³¹ Sevket Hylton Akyildiz, 'Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin: Uzbekistan from 1925 to 1952', *Vakanüvis International Journal of Historical Researches*, 4, no. 2, (Fall 2019), 522.

³² Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*, London: Routledge, 2013, 102.

³³ Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan*, p. 165, cited in Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians*, 85.

³⁴ Annette Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan* (London: George Allen, 1903), p. 221, cited in Bacon, *Central Asia*, 85-86.

running and walking races; wrestling; animal blood sports; and everyday country sports.

The various types of Central Asian equestrian sports developed within the broader context of regional horse culture, and in order to understand the former, it is necessary to reflect upon the latter. Central Asians established a horse culture due to their lived reality of steppe lands, deserts, and vast open plains—particularly the Turkmen and the Kazakhs. The Central Asians needed to communicate, trade, fight enemies (and partake in blood feuds) across steppe lands.³⁵ On the steppe lands, among the Kazakh tribes, Bacon reports that '*Kazak pastoral nomadism was centred around the horse*' and '*Children began to ride at an early age*'. Furthermore, '*Often Kazaks rode great distances for tamasha (entertainment) whether it was an exchange of news and gossip, the arrival of a notable visitor, or a wedding or funeral*'.³⁶ In Central Asia, the young male horse rider (*djigit*, *yigit*) was often a young man, an accomplished equestrian, or a warrior. The label *djigit* implies energy, action, and, to some degree, participation in a martial sport, hunting, or military training. It reflects elements of physical exercise and horse riding.³⁷ However, the published literature reveals that equestrian games also involve female riders (see below). The following looks at two types of equestrian games (polo and *kupari*) and then traces the different types of traditional horse races.

In Central Asia, two different types of equestrian games have existed since past times – and both continue today – one uses sticks and a ball (polo), similar to modern-day polo, and the other uses the 75-pound carcass of a sheep or goat (*kupari*). *Chavgonbozi* or *chovgan* (Uzbek)³⁸

³⁵ Chris Bradley and Andrew Palmer, *The Silk Road*, Basingstoke: Insight, 2008, 49, 65.

³⁶ Alexis Levshin, *Description des hordes et des steppes des Kirghiz-Kazaks ou Kirghiz-Kaissaks*, trans. Ferry de Pigny (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1840), pp. 341-342, 348-349, 408-409, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 29.

³⁷ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, 258.

³⁸ *Chovgan in the Azerbaijani language*. Source: 'Kok boru, traditional horse game', *Intangible Cultural History*. UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kok-boru-traditional-horse-game-01294> (accessed 24 February 2020.)

The UNESCO site says: '*The most experienced players serve as referees, while another category consists of the 'Kalystar' (elders), who ensure the fairness of the game. The element is an expression of the cultural and historic tradition and spiritual identity of its*

is not unlike modern-day equestrian polo with sticks and balls (an ice-hockey stick and not with a long-handled mallet). The Tajik version (*guibozi*) used a mallet-like stick. However, the playing field is smaller in both examples, and the two opposing teams are larger; originally, cavalry soldiers played. It requires the riders to be agile and resilient. This type of polo has a deep history in the Pamir mountain region of the Tajiks.³⁹ One theory says the sport originated in Genghis Khans' Mongol-Tatar society as *chaugan*, though disputed among historians.⁴⁰

An alternative type of game, *kupari* (*uloq-kupari*, *ulak kupkari*, *kokpur*, *kok boru*, *buzkashi*, *baiga*),⁴¹ evolved into a game of two teams of men on horseback competing to grab hold and retain the body of a dead goat or ram or calf and score points by carrying it over a finish line.⁴² Its roots are ancient, and the sources say that historically, large numbers of male riders competed at events.⁴³ It became part of community celebrations. Bacon's study mentions that at Turkmen weddings, 'there were races and various games on horseback, including *baiga*, a mounted contest for the carcass of a goat'.⁴⁴ This historical form of polo continues among today's Central Asians.

The Kazakh and Kyrgyz events called *alaman-baiga* (*alaman-poyga*) produced skilled and prepared cavalry soldiers. It was a war game that

practitioners and serves to unite communities regardless of social status, fostering a culture of teamwork, responsibility and respect.

³⁹ 'Tajik Sports and Games', <https://www.Advantour.com>, (accessed 25 January 2022).

⁴⁰ Yuri Lukashin, 'In Kazakh Steppes, Uzbek Valleys and Tajik Mountains', in *National Folk Sports in the USSR*, ed. Yuri Lukshin, Moscow: Progress Press, 1980, 116.

⁴¹ In Turkic, '*kup*' refers to 'many'. In Persian '*ari*' means 'work', thus *kupari* is 'work of many people'. Source: Facts and Details, 'Uzbek Folk Sports and Traditional Entertainment', <https://factsanddetails.com> (accessed 14 Mar 2022). In Persian, *buzkashi* refers to 'goat grabbing'. Toby Cox says that in Kyrgyzstan the game is called *kok boru* (blue/grey wolf), and might have originated from an ancient time when shepherds, seeking to protect their sheep, killed wolves. They used the wolf's carcass in the game. Source: Toby Cox, 'Kok Boru: Do you have what it takes to play this Central Asian sport?' <https://www.blog.nationalgeographic.org/2017/12/28/kok-boru-do-you-have-what-it-takes-to-play-this-central-asian-sport/> (accessed 9 April 2022).

⁴² Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Polo', <https://www.britannica.com/sports/polo> (accessed 7 April 2016).

⁴³ 'Tajik Sports and Games', <https://www.Advantour.com>, (accessed 25 January 2022).

⁴⁴ Tolstov *et al.*, *Narody Srednei Azii*, II, 115-116; and O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, I, 198-199, 251; II, 92, 301-303, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 55.

Nargiza Isaqova reports '*reached its greatest development in the Middle Ages*'.⁴⁵ 'Alaman' means a battle involving a cavalry detachment; also, it refers to a cavalry soldier or warrior in the mounted attack. *Alaman-baiga* races saw riders compete over long distances across rugged terrain (80 kilometres or more). It even is mentioned in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz folk epics about long races and folk heroes; '*Kazakh folk tales also tell of the amazing racing steeds of the time*'.⁴⁶ According to Bacon, long-distance horse races and equestrian games occurred at the end of communal ceremonial feasts (weddings and Islamic holidays), with the winning riders awarded a prize. '*Long-distance races often taxed the endurance of even the hardy Kazakh mounts*', remarks Bacon.⁴⁷ Isaqova says the regional event encompassed many Central Asian communities, bringing fame to the winning rider and their town or city.⁴⁸

A medium to shorter distance horse race existed among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz called the *baiga*. It was often teenagers and young adults involved; the race used natural obstacles in the landscape to test the rider's ability, mental strength and knowledge of the horse's capabilities. It required tactical skills and evaluation of the upcoming terrain.⁴⁹

A different type of shorter distance race occurred between young, unmarried men (*djigit*) and women and was associated with courtship. Lukashin writes, about a short race, that the Kazakh and Kyrgyz labelled 'wolf maiden' (*kysz-bori*) and is '*described in the ancient chronicle*' and supposedly Marco Polo observed it.⁵⁰ The aim was for the male rider to 'impress' his bride by winning a horse race against her; it was a test of '*riding agility, with the girl trying to elude the young man who sought to cut across her path*', reports Bacon.⁵¹ Here, the notion is that the young

⁴⁵ Nargiza Isaqova, 'The Role of Uzbek National Folk Games in Spiritual and Moral Education', *International Journal on Orange Technology*, 3, no 6 (June 2021), 16.

⁴⁶ Yuri Lukashin, 'In the Kazakh Steppes, Uzbek Valleys and Tajik Mountains', in *National Folk Sports in the USSR*, ed. Yuri Lukashin, Moscow: Progress Press, 1980, 111.

⁴⁷ Levshin, Description, pp. 318, 368-372, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Isaqova, 'The Role of Uzbek National Folk Games', 16.

⁴⁹ Lukashin, 'In the Kazakh Steppes', 112.

⁵⁰ Lukashin, 'In the Kazakh Steppes', 112.

⁵¹ Alexis Levshin, *Description des hordes et des steppes des Kirghiz-Kazaks ou Kirghiz-Kaissaks*, trans. Ferry de Pigny (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1840), pp. 318, 368-372;

male riders were physically strong with appropriate horse riding skills required for work, making the unmarried among them suitable husbands. Today it is called 'chasing a maiden on horseback' races (*kyz-kuumui*, or *kyz-kuu*). Lukashin comments, '*This is very much a folk game of fun which never fails to entertain and has come down to us without hardly a change.*'⁵²

Equestrian contests also saw expert riders in weaponry compete, for example, with the bow (*zhamby-atu*, *jamby atu*). Popular since ancient times, Bacon remarks: '*Archery contests tested skill in shooting both from a standing position and while riding horseback at full speed.*'⁵³ *Saiys* (*saish*), both a Kyrgyz and Uzbek game, saw two mounted riders attempt to remove each other forcibly using their lances. The *zhorga-zhary* game is held during (Kazakh) festivals and includes girls and women participants; the *zhorga* is a horse (with rider) and is '*distinguished by its special smooth and rhythmic movement*', and horse dressage is perhaps the closest modern-day comparator. *Kumis-alu* (*tenge alu*) sees the horseperson ride at full gallop while, at some point, leaning down to pick up coins off the ground. Another race and Kazakh pastime was camel racing (*tuis-zharys*).⁵⁴

James Riordan explains the continuity of these Central Asian traditional horse games and recreation in the face of twentieth-century modernity and authoritarian Soviet Union sports policies. Riordan highlights games, like wrestling on horseback, and outlines what he saw during his Soviet-era Central Asia fieldwork.⁵⁵

Arminius Vambery, *Sketches of Central Asia* (London: W.H. Allen, 1868), p. 293; Henri Moser, *A travers l'Asie Centrale* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1885), pp. 33-34; Edward Nelson Fell, *Russian and Nomad* (New York: Duffield, 1916), p. 152, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 45-46.

⁵² Lukashin, 'In the Kazakh Steppes', 112.

⁵³ Bacon, *Central Asians*, 45.

⁵⁴ Lukashin, 'In the Kazakh Steppes', 112-115.

⁵⁵ James Riordan states '*Equestrian and wrestling events are popular among the Central Asians and Transcaucasian peoples: kyz-kuumui – chasing a maiden on horseback, oodarysh – wrestling on horseback, at-chabysh – horse racing, are all popular in Kirgizia and, with slight variations, are also popular in all other Central Asian republics. I have witnessed these exciting folk games (and some more gruesome spectacles) at the traditional Saban-tui of Tatars in south-eastern Bashkiria – a colourful festival that must*

The *audaryspak* (or *er enish*) game saw two seated male horse riders compete to unsaddle the other and throw them. It requires a sturdy and mobile horse. Omer Tuzcuogullari and Kamil Iskender say wrestling on horseback was an ancient Turkic game exclusively undertaken by men:

'Horseback wrestling is an indispensable combat game played at the festivals, feasts, sports events and assemblies of the Turkic Republics of Central Asia. A popular sport in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it requires substantial physical strength and will to fight. Its local names include Oodaryş and Audaryspak, pronounced "er-enish"'.⁵⁶

The combat element of the Central Asian physical culture had other manifestations, notably in archery and the hunting party. While horse culture in Central Asia has ancient roots, it is matched in importance by one material item used for hunting, entertainment, and war: the bow and arrow of the archer. The archer's bow has cultural significance in Asia in the way that the sword and mace have in Europe. Lee Lawrence reports that in the Islamic tradition, the bow is mentioned and has a crucial role: '*In Islam, too, the bow holds a special place. It is the weapon the Archangel Gabriel handed down to Adam, the one God commanded the Prophet Muhammad to use.*' Lawrence says about forty Hadith⁵⁷ of Prophet Muhammad discuss archery strengthening the physical body and soul, '*and while some hadith encourage metaphorical interpretations, others led to the establishment of archery instruction as fundamental to physical fitness.*'⁵⁸ Lawrence describes how archery was common to all of the Eurasian empires and how it reached its zenith with the Turkish military:

have continued with a modicum of change for many, many, centuries... Various forms of national wrestling are, of course, widespread: alaman-baiga in Uzbekistan... gyulesh in Azerbaidzhan, kurash in Turkmenia'. Source: James Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 306-307.

⁵⁶ Ömer Tarkan Tuzcuoğullari and Kamil Boğaç İskender. 'A Study on Horseback Wrestling, A Traditional Turkish Sport', *European Journal of Physical Education and Sport Science*, 3, no. 12 (2017), 429-433; 429.

⁵⁷ The Hadith is a tradition (actions or approval) or written report and the source for the Sunnah of Muhammad.

⁵⁸ Lee Lawrence, 'History's Curve', *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200305/history.s.curve.htm>, 54, no 5 (September/October 2003), 2-11.

‘While Persians, Parthians, Turks, Mongols, Mughals and others all had highly developed traditions, most archers today consider Turkish bows of the late 1700’s and 1800’s to be the high-water mark of the Asian composite bow. After that time, firearms began to dominate the battlefield, fewer and fewer people had time for archery as sport, and the bowyer’s art declined.’⁵⁹

Across the region, weapons of war were vital in hunting wild animals. The Central Asian tribal leaders, chieftains and governors (*bey, beg, bek, bai*) controlled the hunting parties targeting wild animals. Whether small or large, the hunt was both a distraction and entertainment, but its administration and the tactics used to seize or kill wild animals gave the young male hunters military-type training in planning, pursuing, and teamwork and prepared them for armed campaigns.⁶⁰ John Lawton explains ‘*Hunting, in particular the technique of the drive, also played an important role in the Turkic economy. Their main prey were mountain goats and roe deer.*’⁶¹ Rafis Abazov reports that centuries of animal hunting in the region resulted in the extinction of some species—and the scarcity of others. He discusses the wild animals hunted and the legacy of overhunting in Central Asia:

‘In the medieval era, Central Asia was also known as a hunting ground for tigers, deer, gazelles, brown bear, mountain goats (arkhars), and mountain sheep (there is a famous Marco Polo sheep, *Ovis Poli*), snow leopards, and other animals, but by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of those animals had been hunted to extinction.’⁶²

Another form of hunting favoured regionally, especially by the rich, used birds of prey of different types and sizes. Though trained eagles caught foxes, the prey was often rabbits, marmots, and small

⁵⁹ Lawrence, ‘History’s Curve’, 2-11.

⁶⁰ Akyildiz, ‘Modern and Folk Sports in Central Asia’, 522.

⁶¹ John Lawton, ‘The Cradle of the Turks’, *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199402/the.cradle.of.the.turks.htm>, 45, no. 2 (March/April 1994), 2-11.

⁶² Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, 248.

mammals.⁶³ Falconry (*kus-samu*, hunting with birds of prey) had long existed in Central Asia, and, consequently, the bird trainers and their owners acquired specialist knowledge and skills. The trainers passed their skills to their sons, continuing the tradition and livelihood. Abazov comments:

'In fact, the vast steppe and mountains of Central Asia were so well known for hunting with falcons and eagles that for centuries sultans and khans from distant lands invited experienced bird trainers and bought Central Asian hunting birds.'⁶⁴

Rebecca Schulz comments that scholars researching at the Peregrine Fund's Archives of American Falconry (Boise, Idaho) say:

'the practice of hunting with birds of prey originated among nomadic tribes in Central Asia around 6000 years ago. Among the scarce records are Hittite pottery shards that suggest that falconry was a custom of royalty on the Anatolian Peninsula as early as 4000 years ago. Tang Dynasty paintings depict falconry as having come into China from the north only in the seventh century of our era.'⁶⁵

The bodyguard that protected Genghis Khan was chosen from a regiment of falconers, while his grandson Qubilay Khan had a keen interest in falconing expeditions, wrote Marco Polo. Schulz argues that *'Though falconry was well known to both Europeans and Arabs from very early times, both groups adopted it as a sport only after the 13th century, after the Mongolian invasions and the Crusades.'*⁶⁶ Schulz, writing in the context of falconry in contemporary Kazakhstan, captures the unique relationship between humans and birds of prey in this method of hunting and how it helps shape the self-identity of the falconer: *'It requires a combination of strength and gentleness and a*

⁶³ Rebecca Schulz, 'The Eagle Hunters', *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200501/the.eagle.hunters.htm>, 56, no.1 (January/February 2005), 12-19.

⁶⁴ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, 248.

⁶⁵ Rebecca Schulz, 'The Eagle Hunters', *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200501/the.eagle.hunters.htm>, 56, no.1 (January/February 2005), 12-19.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Schulz, 'The Eagle Hunters', *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200501/the.eagle.hunters.htm>, 56, no.1 (January/February 2005), 12-19.

*reverence for the natural world—and, above all else, what Kazakhs regard as a valiant spirit that exemplifies ideals of honor and manhood.*⁶⁷

Kazakh skiing hunters sought wild animals in the harsh winter climate of Eurasia. The Soviet author Lukashin outlines the use of skis by the Turkic peoples for hunting and trapping purposes in the snowy terrain: *'Skiing was also well known even in Central Asia'*.⁶⁸ The author states that the Turkic tribes wore skis for transport during the winter season, noting the Kazakh example. During the medieval period the Chinese labelled them *'Turks with wooden horses'*. While the Arab historian of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Rashid ad-Din describes the use of skis by Kazakhs. The author tells us that their lands contain mountains and forests, and the Kazakh hunt a large number of grouse here:

“They make special boards which they call chaneh and stand upon them”, then, “take hold of a stick and, sliding through the snow, push themselves along with the stick, just as if they were driving a boat through water. That is how they travel in their chaneh over the steppe and through valleys, down slopes and up hills, in pursuit of mountain oxen and other animals”.⁶⁹

The theme of travel continues in running games. The Kazakhs had their ‘day journey’ races (*jayau-jarys/zhayau-zharys*), cross-country running over a mixed steppe terrain, forest, and hills.⁷⁰ The race included rugged terrain with natural obstacles, hills, and mountain streams; the classical distance was one day’s travel (similar to an Olympic-style marathon). The Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Tajiks ran their *zhayau-zhary* races separately. Regional elites financially supported another form of foot running that communicated news. The source is *Siaset-namei*, an eleventh-century work by Vizier Nizam-al-Mulq, which tells how foot runners (*batba*), stationed at distances apart from each

⁶⁷ Rebecca Schulz, ‘The Eagle Hunters’, *Aramco World* <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/200501/the.eagle.hunters.htm>, 56, no.1 (January/February 2005), 12-19.

⁶⁸ Yuri Lukashin, ‘Folk Games’, in *National Folk Sports in the USSR*, ed. Yuri Lukshin, Moscow: Progress Press, 1980, 22.

⁶⁹ Lukashin, ‘Folk Games’, 23.

⁷⁰ Lukshin, ‘Folk Games’, 23.

other; when ordered, the first runner would set off with important news to deliver it to the second runner, and so forth: '*...news would be brought in a single day of an event that is taking place some fifty farsangs away*'.⁷¹

Wrestling was a common nomadic and oasis pastime among all ethnic groups of the region, each with its distinctive ritual. It was known as *gyulesh* (Azeri), *kurash* (Uzbek), *alysh* (Kyrgyz), *gushtogiri* (Tajik), *goresh* (Turkmen) and *kuresh* (Kazakh).⁷² Indeed, its practice among the Central Asians is said to go back to ancient times. During the last 700 years, it was common in everyday settings and at festivals. Isaqova comments that wrestling is '*reflected in fiction, in a number of fairy tales, folk tales, folklore, and heroic epics. There is a mention of kurash as one of the types of hand-to-hand fighting during military clashes*'.⁷³ Over generations, two forms emerged, Ferghana and the Bukhara-Khorezm. The wrestlers (*palvans*) wore wide trousers, light boots, and a *chapan* (a cotton-padded cloak). '*By the old tradition, wrestlers in Tashkent, Ferghana, Andizhan and Namaangan regions*' before wrestling perform a circular dance, which helps their warm-up for the athletics. '*This kurash style is similar to the Tajik wrestling gushtingiri and to the national wrestling of the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, and the Turkmen*', comments Lukashin.⁷⁴

The organisation of fights between animals for human recreation in Central Asia existed during the period we are studying, even though Islamic tradition proscribes the misuse and torture of animals. One Hadith quotes Prophet Muhammad saying: '*A good deed done to an animal is as meritorious as a good deed done to a human being, while an act of cruelty to an animal is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being*'.⁷⁵ Today observing animals fight for human entertainment or gambling is morally problematic and raises questions about animal rights. Still, in the context of the historical era 1400 to 1850AD, when

⁷¹ Lukashin, 'In Kazakh Steppes', 115.

⁷² Lukshin, 'Folk Games', 8.

⁷³ Isaqova, 'The Role of Uzbek National Folk Games', 17.

⁷⁴ Lukshin, 'In Kazakh Steppes', 117-118.

⁷⁵ Sira Abdul Rahman, 'Religion and Animal Welfare—An Islamic Perspective', *Animals*, 2017, 7, no. 11: 1-6, 2.

mentalities and cultural norms were very different in Eurasia to what they are today, there is evidence of ‘animal blood sports’. Bacon writes that in the towns and cities, people arranged fights between animals, including ‘—rams, cocks, and quails—in which the spectators bet on the outcome’; using historical accounts, Bacon reports that the wealthy Uzbeks (in Khiva) kept rams for fighting purposes during the mid-nineteenth century. In Bukhara, cock and quail fights happened during festivals, in springtime, and near teahouses for spectators to attend.⁷⁶

Country sports and pastimes existed, pitting human physical strength and agility against physical nature. In the lands of the Tajiks and elsewhere, raging mountain streams were traversed with the aid of a rope stretched across them (*gupsar*). Some individuals use a pole to balance themselves as they walk the tightrope stretched across the water (a form of *dorbozi*).⁷⁷ Other locals enter the raging spring water and swim across with the aid of an air-inflated sack or animal bladder. In another field game, *tayak-zhugurtu*, men threw missiles (rocks) at different ranges. Pedestrian field hockey – an earlier version of the modern game – was called by the Tajiks *chavgonbozi* (the same name as equestrian polo, while the Uzbeks label it *chowgan*). It was similar to modern hockey and had eleven players on each side, but the rules differed.⁷⁸

The Winter weather kept many people inside their dwellings – including the nomad communities and isolated villages – where the locals entertained themselves. Bacon notes ‘*In winter. When the cold kept Kazakhs indoors, young people played various games while sitting in a circle around the hearth in the yurt*’.⁷⁹ The Turkmen were known to play chess, checkers and other games; for instance, one indoor pastime (*ordo, chuko, asysk*) was similar to marbles but used ‘*sheep’s knucklebones*’.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Schuyler, *Turkistan* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), pp. 128, 234-235, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 87.

⁷⁷ Lukashin, ‘Folk Games’, 24.

⁷⁸ Lukashin, ‘In Kazakh Steppes’, 8, 115-116.

⁷⁹ Levshin, *Description*, pp 318, 368-372, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 46.

⁸⁰ S.P.Tolstov, *Narody Srednei Azii* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1962), pp. 221-224, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 55.

The middle-aged and retired traders, agricultural workers, and craftworkers expressed their masculinity through social interaction. In everyday life, men frequented traditional teahouses (*chaikhanes*). The teahouse, found in urban settlements, was a place to unwind and share humorous stories, network and share information. Here games like backgammon (*nard*) and chess were played: '*men spent much of their free time... drinking tea, talking, and often playing chess or gambling at such games as tossing coins or dice*', states Bacon.⁸¹

Conversely, the cultural norms required women to hold their gatherings in the privacy of their homes, specifically during weddings and '*other domestic festivals*'. The women from wealthier families had the time and access to capital and social networks to hold private parties. Here, women professional entertainers, dancers, and musicians would perform for the all-female audience. Some privately educated women played stringed instruments, like the *dutar*, while others performed folk dances to the tambourine.⁸²

Festivals, Fairs, and Islamic Holidays

Central Asia's traditional festivals and ceremonies included folk sports, music and dance events. These largescale get-togethers formed part of the native social calendar and celebrated holidays, weddings, funerals, and royal birthdays. The notable ones are the Spring Equinox (*Nawruz*, pre-Islamic New Year's Day) and the two Islamic holidays (*Eid al-Fitr*, '*id al-Fitr*, *Ramzan Hayit*) at the end of the Ramadan fast, and *Eid al-Adha*, *Qurban Bayram* (the '*Sacrifice Feast*'). At festivals, gathered extended family members and other ethnic kin.⁸³

The capital and resources used to organise large sports-themed meetings came from wealthy landowners, tribal elites, and community heads of the *mahallia*. The popular folk sports were '*horse racing, wrestling, heavy weightlifting*'.⁸⁴ The professional entertainers, who

⁸¹ Schuyler, *Turkistan*, pp. 128, 234-235, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 86.

⁸² Moser, *A travers l'Asie Centrale*, pp. 175-177, 200, 259-260, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 87-88.

⁸³ Sevket Akyildiz, 'Cultural Change in Central Asia: Brezhnev, Modern Sports, and Memories in Uzbekistan, 1964-1982', *History Studies: International Journal of History*, 12, no. 1 (February 2020), 35-54.

⁸⁴ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, 248.

made their living from giving performances in return for payment, were formed around guilds.⁸⁵ During the Ramadan fast, at night, when the fast was broken and people ate, the wealthier families in the oasis settlements would hire entertainers for night-time performances. Likewise, during the feast to celebrate the end of *Eid al-Adha*, children received toys, and '*entertainment was provided by stiltwalkers, puppet shows, clowns and others*'.⁸⁶ In the bazaars too, entertainers performed to audiences for a small fee.

The Central Asian Gypsy/Roma community - in particular the south-eastern parts of the region – provided male and female dancers and musicians, for payment, to the isolated Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz villages and settlements. Due to economic poverty in the Gypsy/Roma community and their precarious existence, the gender division in employment found elsewhere in Central Asia was not enforced. Some Gypsy/Roma families travelled around to provide entertainment services and earn their livelihood; locally, they were referred to as '*from Afghanistan*', while in that country, the Afghans said the Gypsies/Roma were originally '*from India*'.⁸⁷

Traditional festivals also included circuses and fairs. Performers entertained the audience of adults and children. Acrobats performed gymnastic exercises, such as walking a tightrope with a balancing pole (another instance of *dorbozi*),⁸⁸ showing flexibility and courage—often without a safety net. Isaqova remarks,

'The performances of the tightrope walkers gathered a large number of spectators. Acrobats-tightrope walkers not only performed exercises in balance with a balance bar, but also complex multiple jumps on a high rope, requiring excellent physical fitness.'⁸⁹

Bukhara became known for its tightrope walkers. Tightrope walkers performed aerial acrobatics at circuses and fairs, bazaars and central

⁸⁵ Schuyler, *Turkistan*, pp. 171-179, cited in Bacon, *Central Asia*, 76.

⁸⁶ Schuyler, *Turkistan*, p. 330, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 81.

⁸⁷ Moser, *A traves l'Asie Centrale*, pp. 175-177, cited in Bacon, *Central Asians*, 87.

⁸⁸ Lukashin, 'Folk Games', 24.

⁸⁹ Isaqova, 'The Role of Uzbek National Folk Games', 17.

squares. Often loud music is played to accompany the tightrope walker, notably wind instruments, drums and tambourines.⁹⁰

Abazov describes muscular, strong men (*palvans*) displaying their physical strength '*by wrestling and lifting rocks, local farmers showed their best horses in horse racing; local weapon makers showed the quality of their swords and other weapons*'. The well-known and accomplished strongmen won the crowd's admiration and were invited to compete at future meetings, '*bringing glory to their native cities or towns*'. Spectators watched sword skills and staged sword fights for visual entertainment and appreciation of technique. Also observed were cross-country running and foot racing (a training technique that prepared soldiers for the endurance and stamina required in armed conflict)⁹¹ and compatible with Islamic tradition.

In Photograph One, the image dates from a historical era at the end of the paper's focus. A (Russian) photographer might have taken the image during the region's colonisation circa 1865 to 1884AD or later during the early twentieth century. The author has no information about the place or date of the photograph (it was purchased in a tourist information centre in 2009 during fieldwork in Samarkand, Uzbekistan). However, it gives us an impression of Central Asian leisure, highlighting the organised amusements for mass entertainment and distraction from worldly affairs. In the black and white photograph, native entrepreneurs have provided wooden Ferris Wheel-type structures⁹² and stalls for the town's folk to enjoy.

⁹⁰ Facts and Details, 'Uzbek Folk Sports and Traditional Entertainment', <https://factsanddetails.com> (accessed 14 Mar 2022).

⁹¹ Abazov, *Culture and Customs*, 248.

⁹² A fairground attraction consisting of a large vertical wheel that revolves with people seated on the outer edge of the spokes.

Photograph 1: A scene of Fair in Central Asia (possibly Uzbekistan) during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century



Source: Postcard, Uzbekistan fieldwork 2009, unknown publisher

Conclusion

The paper's analysis derived from selected online and hardcopy sources explored the nature of Central Asia's traditional sports and games from 1400 to 1850AD among the nomads and oasis communities, outlining the sports and games, participants, spectators, and the places and sites of recreation. The study explored more than twenty-five traditional sports and leisure pursuits, covering: the region's horse culture, two versions of polo, *kupari*, horse racing (and riders' gender); archery; three types of hunting (the hunting party, falconry, and skiing hunters); running races; walking races; wrestling; animal blood sports; and everyday country sports.

On the one hand, Central Asian traditional sports originated in work-related strength, stamina and endurance exercises, horse riding, hunting parties, archery, and military training. On the other hand, folk

games and recreation provided people with entertainment at social gatherings, festivals, and celebrations and occupied them through long winter nights. Furthermore, Central Asian traditional sport as a cultural practice reflects group identity, social behaviour, and ideas about masculinity and femininity. In this case, the story of Central Asian traditional sport and games mirrors the historical picture found elsewhere in the world, particularly in other Eurasian societies.

Traditional sport did not start in 1400AD. Instead, sports and games form part of Central Asia's deep history. However, between 1400 to 1850AD, the region's cultural milieu strongly reflected Islamic values and practices, and the Turkic languages were the primary language group spoken. There is a debate within the early Islamic tradition about which sports and games could and should be played. It included the respectful treatment of wild and non-wild animals and expressed a code for hunting (for survival and food purposes). Recommended in the Islamic tradition for Muslims are good health and physical exercise and for people to enjoy leisure as a distraction from work and everyday issues. Notably, many of the Central Asian traditional sports and recreation practices, like wrestling, horse riding, archery, running and walking races, were permissible in the Islamic tradition. Also, we can note a continuity in the sports, games, and recreational practices during the Islamisation of the region. The Islamic society was flexible and confident enough to absorb elements of the physical exercise culture with origins in ancient times.

There are some points for scholars to reflect upon when approaching new research about Central Asian traditional sport. First, English language sources discuss young and middle-aged men and their sports practices; however, it would be helpful if a Turkic and Russian language skills researcher investigated the primary and non-English secondary sources that address women and children⁹³ (including different social classes). Second, the role of Central Asia's ethnic minorities like the

⁹³ See Junaid Bashir, 'Traditional Historical Games of Hazara/Silk Road, Pakistan', <https://www.academia.edu> (accessed 23 February 2022); Sajida Haider Vandal, *Introducing Traditional Games: Honing Skills and Dexterity: Promoting Peace and Social Cohesion Through Heritage Education* (UNESCO: Islamabad, 2013); Facts and Details, 'Uzbek Folk Sports and Traditional Entertainment', <https://factsanddetails.com>.

Gypsies/Roma in traditional recreation as performers and producers would make a novel paper. Third, a study of traditional sports among the majority-Muslim communities in the Caucasus region would make a worthwhile research paper. The potential for essays is likewise many.

Central Asia's traditional sports remain popular in rural and urban sectors and integrated into independence celebrations and festivals, like the Spring Nawruz and the Islamic holidays. Proving that traditional sports can survive authoritarian communism, modernity and globalisation (world capitalism) if they have historical roots among an ethnic group and provide a sense of cultural authenticity. Here, government resources assist locals by organising traditional sports events and championships. However, the funds and energy of the locals and entrepreneurs are equally as crucial in sustaining traditional games and fairs. Traditional sports can be exhilarating for sportspeople and provide a shared memory of joy among spectators and participants. Indeed, traditional real-time sport as mass entertainment is a welcome distraction from everyday worries.

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