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METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL**<http://mentaljournal-jspu.uz/index.php/mesmj/index>**NATIONAL GAMES OF THE PEOPLES OF CENTRAL ASIA: CULTURAL
HERITAGE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY****Muyassar Mukhiddinovna Nuriddinova***Associate Professor**Department of Theory and Methodology of Physical Education and Sport**Uzbek State University of Physical Education and Sport**E-mail: nuriddinova.muyassar83@mail.ru**Chirchik, Uzbekistan***ABOUT ARTICLE**

Key words: ethnosport, folk games, national sports, kupkari-uloq, buzkashi, horse selection, equestrian sport, agility, bravery, social qualities.

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Abstract: Among the peoples of Central Asia, a wide variety of similar traditional folk games are observed, which has been reflected in the scholarly views of numerous researchers. The traditional games of each nation possess distinctive features as well as common similarities. In particular, the principles of horse selection, the content of the game, and its representation in historical sources vary among different peoples. The Uzbek people also have numerous horse-related traditional games, including Kupkari-Uloq, Qiz Quvmoq, Horseback Swordsmanship, Oltin Qoboq, and Chavgon. Among these, Kupkari-Uloq continues to occupy a special place as one of the largest and most widespread ethnosport disciplines. In Central Asia, Uloq-Kupkari as an ethnosport has been the subject of numerous scientific studies and is regarded as one of the most extensively researched topics in the history of physical education and sport. Based on written sources and previous scholarly studies, this article analyzes the characteristics and historical stages of development of the Uloq-Kupkari game among the Uzbek people.

Introduction. In Uzbekistan, considerable attention has been devoted to the promotion and popularization of national sports and folk games (ethnosport), the broad involvement of children and adolescents in these activities, and the strengthening of international cooperation in this sphere. In particular, in accordance with the Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-5149 dated 17 June 2021, and the Presidential Resolution No. PQ-259 dated 25 May 2022 “On Measures for the Promotion and Development of Ethnosport Types,” a comprehensive program for the development and popularization of ethnosport until 2025 was approved. The resolution specifically emphasizes the preparation of promotional and educational materials on the essence of national sports and folk games, as well as the systematic provision of explanations in all educational institutions regarding their physical, intellectual, spiritual, and moral significance within physical education classes.

Game is a historical, social, and philosophical phenomenon that represents a complex form of motor activity consisting of various movements. It is one of the fundamental forms of human activity. The concept of “game” encompasses a wide spectrum of physical actions, ranging from the simple manipulative movements of an infant playing with a rattle to organized physical activities performed in sports such as basketball, gymnastics, wrestling, and other disciplines.

As an essential element of culture, game develops in parallel with all other forms of social culture and serves as an effective pedagogical means in the upbringing and education of children and adolescents. It is always directed toward a specific purpose and reflects activities of diverse forms, instructions, and thematic content. From early childhood, game activity demonstrates a close relationship with labor and creative activity.

Game is also a form of creative activity that requires a serious pedagogical approach in the educational development of children and young people. A wide range of folk games is broadly распространены among children and adolescents. A distinctive characteristic of folk games is the clear manifestation of movement within the content and structure of the game itself. Various motor activities are reflected in their plots, motivating themes, and underlying ideas.

These games are aimed at overcoming different difficulties and obstacles encountered in the process of achieving the game’s objectives, while simultaneously contributing to the development of physical qualities, courage, agility, and patriotic values.

Although game activity is relatively simple at the initial stages of development, it gradually becomes richer in content and increasingly complex over time.

Materials and methods. Folk games represent a syncretic cultural phenomenon that integrates movement based on a specific rhythmic sequence, ethnographic details endowed with symbolic meaning, traditional patterns, and elements of spectacle into a unified whole. Folk games originated in ancient times as an integral part of primitive rituals and ceremonial practices, which constituted one of the earliest elements of our ancestors' worldview and thinking. Over time, the games embedded in such rituals gradually lost their ritualistic function and transformed into forms of public entertainment and recreational activities.

Values embody the faith, honor, dignity, conscience, and morality of an entire people and nation. Therefore, at every historical stage, the preservation, protection, development, and transmission of these values to future generations as cultural heritage place significant responsibilities upon scholars, intellectuals, and researchers.

The main purpose of Uzbek national folk games is to educate the younger generation in the spirit of our brave and heroic ancestors and, through mastering these games, to ensure their comprehensive physical, moral, and spiritual development, while simultaneously increasing their interest in and respect for the history, culture, and traditions of Uzbekistan.

Any folk game is inseparably connected with labor activity, way of life, and the surrounding environment. This is especially evident in the games of peoples living in different regions. For example, among the Kazakhs the game is known as Kokpar, among the Kyrgyz as Kok-boru, among the Uzbeks as Kupkari or Uloq, and among the Tajiks as Buzkashi. These national games share common features and belong to one cultural and historical tradition [8;].

This game is considered one of the most famous and ancient equestrian sports of Central Asia. These games constitute an important component of the ancient nomadic lifestyle, military preparedness, and ethnocultural values of the peoples of Central Asia.

According to UNESCO, Kok boru is a traditional horseback team game played by two teams, in which riders attempt to carry the ulak (the carcass of a goat or, in modern competitions, its specially designed mould) into the opponent's goal. This game contributes to the formation of teamwork, responsibility, mutual respect, and solidarity.

Among Uzbeks, Kupkari (Uloq) carries essentially the same meaning, in which numerous riders compete to carry the ulak to a designated finish point. This game is especially widely demonstrated during the Navruz festival, weddings, and seasonal public festivities.

In Tajik and Afghan territories, this game is widely known as Buzkashi, which shares the same roots as Kokpar and Kupkari and historically originates from the military-practical exercises of nomadic peoples. According to research, this sport has been developing for many centuries across Central Asia and adjacent regions [3; 104-105].

In general, the common characteristics of these games are manifested in the following aspects: their equestrian basis, the development of horsemanship skills, the requirement of physical strength, agility, and endurance, the formation of team spirit and competitive motivation, and the reflection of the people's historical and cultural heritage.

At the same time, these features allow us to evaluate these national games as a shared ethnosport heritage that unites Turkic and neighboring peoples.

Kupkari is one of the most ancient and popular public spectacles inherited from our ancestors. As a competition traditionally held during wedding ceremonies and public celebrations, it is valued as an event that demonstrates the agility, strength, courage, and aesthetic taste of horse riders.

Kupkari is a national sporting heritage of our people and serves as an important means of educating the younger generation in the spirit of courage, endurance, and bravery. In the development of these folk games, the ceremony of horse selection also holds special significance.

Historical sources contain numerous references to the horses of Central Asia, particularly the horses of the Fergana Valley, ranging from ancient sources to modern historical and ethnographic studies. For example, such descriptions can be found in Greek and Chinese sources, in examples of oral folk literature, and in the works of scholars such as Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Omar Khayyam, and Alisher Navoi, as well as in the memoirs and official records of Russian-speaking historians, ethnographers, and travelers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

When describing horses, these sources also provide characteristics of horse breeds suitable for traditional Turkic games such as Uloq-Kupkari (Kok-boru), races (bayga), and mass horse races. The Qorabayir, Arg'umoq, and Kyrgyz horse breeds are regarded as genuinely ancient local breeds.

Regarding horse selection, the ethnographer A. Shishov, who studied the ethnography of the peoples of Central Asia in the early twentieth century, noted that the Qorabayir represented Kyrgyz and Uzbek horse breeds. Referring to descriptions given by Xenophon, he provided valuable information on horse selection, breeding, horse equipment, and even the practice of covering horses with blankets.

In Karim Shoniyozov's monograph "The Kang State and the Kangs," the quantity of horses in the Hunnic state of the third century BCE can be inferred from the military deployment of troops:

“The army of the Huns was divided into four parts, and the warriors of each division consisted of cavalry mounted on horses of a specific color. The cavalry stationed in the west rode white horses, those in the east gray horses, those in the north black horses, and those in the south yellow horses.”

RESULTS and DISCUSSION. The existence of a highly developed horse-breeding tradition in Central Asia and the formation and development of mass folk games associated with horses indicate the central role of the horse in the region’s cultural life. Therefore, the opportunities for selecting horses suitable for mass folk games were extensive. Historical sources also provide abundant information on horse selection and the qualities that should be taken into consideration.

In Qabusnama, it is stated that the good and bad qualities of a horse can be determined by examining its head structure and color. A fine and handsome horse is described as “baytara-covered.” Such a horse is said to have delicate, aligned, and white teeth; a slightly longer lower lip; elevated and wide nostrils; a broad forehead; long ears set widely apart; a straight neck with a thick base and raised back; a broad chest; open spacing in the rear of both front and hind legs; a strong and long tail; a fine and short croup; and black eyes and eyelashes. These are regarded as the essential characteristics of a high-quality horse.

In addition to the qualities described in Qabusnama, when selecting horses it is also important that the head should not be overly fleshy (referred to in folk terminology as “qoq kalla”). Special attention should also be paid to the amount of white visible in the eye. A clearly visible reddish hue in the eyes is considered an indication of vigor, sharpness, and alertness.

According to experienced elderly horse breeders and riders, horse selection is of particular importance depending on the specific type of Uloq-Kupkari game. For example, in the Fergana, Namangan, and Andijan regions of the Republic of Uzbekistan, as well as in the Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken regions of the Kyrgyz Republic, where calf carcasses are traditionally used, strong and tall horses—known in folk terminology as todakash horses—are preferred, even if they are not particularly fast runners.

By contrast, in the Sughd region of Tajikistan and in the Tashkent, Syrdarya, Jizzakh, and oasis regions of Uzbekistan, where goat carcasses are mainly used, smaller but agile, fast-running, and easily controllable horses are more commonly selected and specially trained.

Mass Uloq-Kupkari games held during weddings and festive ceremonies are organized in coordination with local federations and regional administrative authorities. Such competitions are conducted strictly according to a two-goal system. The organizers are required to submit a written application to the local federation at least 30 days prior to the

scheduled event. Coordination with local authorities and internal affairs bodies is carried out by federation representatives.

The game is held in a specially designated field on a specified date. Depending on the number of participants, the scale of the event, geographical and climatic conditions, and weather circumstances, the date and venue may be subject to change.

The dimensions of the playing field generally range from 300–400 meters in length and 150–200 meters in width, while the distance between the two goals is 250–300 meters. The central contested zone is located in the middle of the field, and both the goals and the central contest area are typically marked with a circular radius of approximately 20 meters [1;54-71].

The competition usually begins at 11:00 or 12:00 and continues until 17:00, taking into account local conditions. The event is supervised by a refereeing panel approved by the local federation and the council of elders. Depending on the scale of participation, one chief referee and two assistant referees are appointed, although in some cases the number of assistant referees may be increased to four.

Under the supervision of the federation and the refereeing council, the weight of the ulak carcass must not exceed 55 kilograms, regardless of the size of the competition.

Once the carcass is thrown into the central zone by an honored or distinguished rider, the chief referee signals the start of the game, and the announcer declares the prize assigned to the goal. When a participating rider successfully carries the carcass into the designated goal circle, the assistant referee confirms the victory by lowering the raised flag.

The chief referee then communicates this information to the announcer, who officially informs the spectators. During the announcement, details such as the prize, the name and surname of the rider-wrestler, place of residence, the horse's nickname, and the owner's details are also announced.

The distribution of prizes equally between the two goals is carried out with the consent of federation representatives, referees, the council of elders, sponsors, or the wedding host.

If a rider carrying the carcass crosses the field boundary line or throws it outside the designated goal radius, the game is stopped and resumed from the central zone. The decision of the chief referee is final and accepted without dispute.

There are various scholarly interpretations regarding the origin of the Kokbori/Kupkari game. Some specialists argue that the game emerged as an imitation of the unusual hunting method by which mounted riders pursued wolves attacking sheep flocks; therefore, the game came to be known as "Kokbori" ("Blue Wolf").

Another interpretation views the game as an ancient form of military training. Particularly noteworthy is the close coordination between rider and horse, where both move toward a common objective through silent mutual understanding.

Ethnographers, based on Kyrgyz oral traditions, emphasize that the game may have originated from ancient wolf-hunting practices, where groups of mounted riders chased wolves across deep snow, killed them with heavy sticks, and attempted to carry the carcass back on horseback. Other riders would then try to seize the carcass from the hunter, creating movements very similar to the modern Kupkari game.

However, some scholars reject the hunting-origin theory and instead argue that the game emerged from the ritual relationship of Turkic peoples with their totemic sacred wolf symbol.

Turning to the formation of this game among Uzbeks, it should be noted that in the folklore traditions of Southern Uzbekistan there is no direct evidence of Kupkari, although horse-related games such as Oltin Qoboq, Chavgon, and Qiz Quvmoq are well attested.

For example, the epic “Oltin Qoboq” occupies a special place in Uzbek oral tradition, where Gorogly organizes the golden pumpkin archery game in order to determine a worthy leader before departing on pilgrimage.

Similarly, in Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur’s Baburnama, although there is no detailed reference to Kupkari, numerous references are made to horses, cavalry forces, and Chavgon (polo-like game).

It should also be remembered that the modern sport of polo, now widespread throughout Europe and the world, is historically linked to the spread of Chavgon through the Mughal dynasty in India.

Likewise, in the works of Alisher Navoi, sports such as wrestling, Chavgon, chess, and Oltin Qoboq are mentioned, while direct references to Uloq-Kupkari are absent.

According to the Encyclopedia of National Sports and Folk Games of Uzbekistan, the etymology of the word Kupkari derives from the Turkic word “kop” and the Persian word “kor,” meaning “the work of many.”

According to the well-known Uzbek folklorist Mamatqul Jo’rayev, Kupkari is one of the most ancient games and its origin is associated with the legendary figure Oghuz Khan. In earlier periods, this game was known as Kokbori, which later evolved phonetically into Kupkari.

Today, Kupkari-Uloq continues to be widely practiced across nearly all regions of Uzbekistan, including Samarkand, Jizzakh, Tashkent, Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya, Navoi, and other mountainous and desert areas, particularly during weddings and public festivals.

As literary evidence of the game's deep roots in Uzbek culture, works such as Abdulla Qodiriy's "Uloqda", Tog'ay Murod's "Ot Kishnagan Oqshom", and Oybek's "Bolalik" vividly portray Uloq as a symbol of bravery, strength, and communal identity.

The repeated appearance of this horse game in prose and narrative literature clearly demonstrates its broad social dissemination and its important place in public life [7;1-15].

Conclusion. These five traditional games of the peoples of Central Asia—Kokpar, horseback wrestling, Kyz Kuush (girl chasing), coin picking, and belt wrestling—although governed by similar rules, bear different names that reflect the ethnic diversity and linguistic richness of the peoples of the region. These games serve not only as a means of physical education but also as an important mechanism for cultural integration and intergenerational continuity.

At present, the preservation and further development of these games through international events such as the World Nomad Games is of particular importance. In the future, it is necessary to transmit these traditions to the younger generation through their broader integration into digital platforms and educational programs.

In short, every generation inherits a cultural legacy from its ancestors, and it is highly recommended that the folk games at risk of being forgotten be taught from early childhood. In this regard, it should be emphasized that introducing children to folk games from preschool age creates positive impressions and stimulates independent personal development. The development of ethnosport disciplines also provides a strong foundation for increasing children's interest in national sports from an early age.

Briefly stated, Kupkari is one of the ethnosport disciplines that, similar to other Turkic peoples, has been widely practiced among Uzbeks and has survived to the present day. The reasons for its formation were connected with both entertainment in social life and military preparedness.

For nomadic or semi-nomadic Turkic communities, there was always a risk of sudden attack while searching for pastures for livestock or while staying in their settlements. Moreover, the people (bodun) could be called to war by the khagan at any moment. For this reason, every young Turkic man was expected to perform physical exercises that developed physical culture and combat readiness.

Although these activities included elements of entertainment, they were, in essence, military exercises. A warrior capable of performing various maneuvers on horseback was regarded as one of the main pillars of Turkic military society.

At the same time, written sources play an important role in determining the historical period in which the Kupkari/Kokbori game emerged in Uzbek social life. Unfortunately, in *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* by Mahmud al-Kashgari—one of the principal sources on the social life of Turkic peoples—although a number of games are mentioned, neither the name of this game nor any clear reference to a similar game is found.

Likewise, we do not encounter explicit mentions of this game in other historical works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, this does not necessarily mean that Kupkari/Kokbori emerged in later periods. Rather, three well-known horse games - Oltin Qoboq, Chavgon, and Qiz Quvish/Qiz Quvmoq - played a significant role in its formation.

In particular, researchers note that in the Qiz Quvish tradition, the form in which meat slaughtered before the wedding and brought by the groom's side was carried away by men from the bride's side, while the groom's men pursued them on horseback, has very ancient roots.

In our view, the Kupkari game is precisely an improved and historically transformed form of this earlier game, whose name evolved over the centuries.

It should also be emphasized that after the sixteenth century, Uzbek tribes played a major role in the wider dissemination of this horse game. As a result, it gradually surpassed Oltin Qoboq and Qiz Quvish in popularity and became widespread. The broad spread of this game among Afghan Uzbeks and in Tajikistan under the name Buzkashi is also closely related to the active migration of Uzbek tribal groups.

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