



## Preservation of Nomadic Culture: Cultural and Environmental Meaning of Nomadic Games

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### Abstract

Nomadic culture is an important part of Turkish history and traditional lifestyle. This culture represents a lifestyle of mobility, interaction with different communities and harmony with nature. However, with the process of modernization and urbanization, this valuable heritage is in danger of extinction. In order to keep this heritage alive and pass it on to future generations, the Nomadic Games were organized in 2014 under the leadership of Kyrgyzstan. The Nomadic Games are a large-scale organization that aims to promote traditional sports, cultural events and the lifestyle of nomadic peoples on an international scale. The event is of great importance in terms of preserving cultural heritage and developing tourism. The Games started in the Issyk Kul region of Kyrgyzstan and were held in 2022 in the Iznik district of Turkey and in 2024 in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. Each new edition of the organization creates a broader impact with the participation of more countries. Traditional sports such as Kökbörü, mounted archery, wrestling, minstrel game and eagle hunting in the Nomadic Games reflect the values of nomadic societies such as physical endurance, warriorship and collective solidarity. In addition, cultural exhibitions, panels and handicraft shows organized during the events attract great international attention by introducing the rich heritage of nomadic peoples. Beyond being an event where only traditional sports are exhibited, the Nomadic Games also play an important role in terms of cultural diplomacy, international cooperation and tourism. While the organization provides economic contributions to the host countries, it continues to promote nomadic culture on a global scale.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, nomad games, nomadic culture, sport, tradition

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### INTRODUCTION

Nomadism is an important element that reflects our character and traditional lifestyle in our history. For us Turks, nomadism is synonymous with being constantly on the move, interacting with different cultures and people while moving to new geographies, and continuing to live our traditional culture while preserving our essence while getting richer in this process. Nomadism is an extremely rich and colorful culture carrier and lifestyle. Although we have largely settled down today, preserving this ancient heritage and introducing it to our youth and passing it on to future generations is extremely important in order for our cultural memory and heritage not to be lost. In addition, nomadic culture includes many of our ancestral sports that we enjoy as a nation. The role played by these sports, especially in the processes of coming together and integrating with the Turkish world, cannot be ignored (Kasapoğlu, 2022).

Nomadic culture has a history of thousands of years and is a lifestyle that has been shaped especially in Central Asia. Nomadic peoples have made significant contributions to world

history not only economically but also culturally and socially with their constantly moving lifestyles. This lifestyle has enabled societies to live in harmony with nature and has enabled them to establish a sustainable order. In addition, elements such as traditional sports, crafts, music and art have formed the unique heritage of this culture. However, due to the impact of industrialization and urbanization, this heritage is in danger of being forgotten today (Erman & Dilay, 2024). In order to keep this valuable heritage alive and pass it on to the future, the Nomadic Games, which were launched in 2014 under the leadership of Kyrgyzstan, have attracted great attention internationally. Nomadic games aim to introduce historical heritage to the modern world by exhibiting the traditional sports, lifestyles and cultural values of nomadic peoples. By encouraging cultural exchange, especially between athletes, tourists and spectators from different geographies, Nomadic Games have also become an important tool in terms of cultural tourism (Yozcu & Demirkol, 2019).

The impact of Nomadic Games on tourism is quite extensive. During the events, host countries host visitors from around the world and make significant contributions to local economies and international recognition. In the regions where these games are held, cultural tourism is developing thanks to the interest in traditional cultures, and the historical and natural beauties of the region are introduced to the world. For example, during the games held in İzmit, Turkey in 2022, tens of thousands of tourists came to the region, which created an important source of income for the local people. In addition, such events contribute to the strengthening of relations between countries and cultural diplomacy (Korkmaz & Kızanlıklı, 2023).

Nomadic Games are not only a traditional sports organization, but also an important platform at the intersection of culture and tourism. These games, while keeping traditional lifestyles alive, also offer a unique opportunity to promote and develop touristic values.

### **Progression**

#### **History of Nomadic Games**

The origin of Nomadic Games is based on the thousands of years of culture of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. The nomadic lifestyle was built on an economic system largely shaped by animal husbandry, and over time, this system allowed the development of many traditional sports in harmony with nature. These sports served as a means of survival for nomadic peoples, hunting, preparation for war, and strengthening social ties between communities. However, with the modernization process, these traditional sports and nomadic lifestyles have increasingly faced the danger of being forgotten (Gündoğdu, 2019).

The Nomadic Games in their modern sense were first organized in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 in order to keep this lost heritage alive and promote it. This event, initiated under the leadership of Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev, was held in the Issyk Kul region on the historical Silk Road route. Approximately 600 athletes from 19 countries participated in the first Nomadic Games. This organization has been accepted as an important step in terms of introducing sports belonging to nomadic culture in the international arena.

### **Historical Importance of Nomadic Culture and Traditional Sports**

The lifestyle of nomadic societies has been shaped in harmony with nature, and this situation is reflected in their sports and games. Traditional sports have served to develop survival skills, bring community members together, and create identity. For example, horse riding represents the mobility and freedom of nomadic societies, while wrestling has become a symbol of physical strength and endurance (Erkal, 1978).

Nomadic life has been shaped in harmony with nature, allowing societies to develop their physical and mental endurance. This way of life has also manifested itself in sports activities. Traditional sports, on the one hand, bring community members together, on the other hand, promote values such as endurance, freedom, and solidarity (Atlı, 2019).

Sports in nomadic cultures also have a ritual meaning. While some activities express respect for the power of nature, others have been seen as a tool to strengthen social ties. For example, games such as Gökbörü (Kök-Börü) emphasize collective cooperation and fighting spirit. A common denominator of these sports is their capacity to bring society together and strengthen common values (Buyar & Altınoğlu, 2023).

### **Main Goals of Nomadic Games**

Nomadic Games not only provide a competitive display of traditional sports, but also emphasize goals such as cultural diplomacy, cooperation and solidarity. The main goals of the organization can be listed as follows:

- Protect and promote the cultural heritage of nomadic peoples,
- Make traditional sports more visible at the international level,
- Strengthen cultural ties among the countries of the Turkic world,
- Revitalize tourism in order to provide economic contribution to the host countries

### **2014 Nomadic Games (Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan)**

The first Nomadic Games held in 2014 attracted great international attention. The opening ceremony of the event showcased traditional clothing, music and dances reflecting the rich culture of the Kyrgyz people, thus establishing a strong cultural bond between the participating countries. This magnificent show emphasized that the Nomadic Games are not only a sports event but also a cultural celebration. As part of the sports events, the traditional games of nomadic peoples that have been going on for centuries were presented to the audience with great excitement. Traditional competitions such as kokbörü, mounted archery, belt wrestling, ashik game and eagle hunting not only showcased the talents of athletes, but also introduced the participants to the depths of nomadic culture. These games allowed the promotion of not only sports but also the historical heritage and cultural values of nomadic peoples on an international platform (<https://worldnomadgames.com>).

### **2016 Nomadic Games (Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan)**

The second Nomadic Games, held in 2016, saw a much larger participation compared to the previous one. This time, athletes and representatives from more than 40 countries participated in the event, thus making the games a major international hit. The main theme of the event was the way of life of nomadic peoples in harmony with nature. In line with this theme, it was aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of both the traditional sports and lifestyle of nomadic culture. The panels and exhibitions organized within the scope of the event introduced different aspects of this culture to the participants and brought the historical, social and cultural heritage of nomadic peoples to a wider audience. In this way, the participants were impressed not only by the sports but also by the daily lives of nomadic peoples, their traditions, handicrafts and their connection with nature. In addition, these games have attracted international attention as an important platform for the preservation and promotion of nomadic culture.

### **2018 Nomadic Games (Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan)**

The third Nomadic Games held in the Issyk Kul region of Kyrgyzstan in 2018 demonstrated that the organization has gained wider acceptance as an international event. Athletes and cultural representatives from more than 80 countries participated in these games. As part of the event, sports such as traditional Kökbörü were followed with great interest, and exhibitions of traditional handicrafts and culinary culture attracted great attention. Thanks to

the intense interest of the international media, the games managed to reach a wider audience (Korkut, 2022).

### **2022 Nomadic Games (Iznik, Türkiye)**

The fourth Nomadic Games were held in Iznik, Bursa, Turkey in 2022, and this event was the first version of the organization to be held outside Central Asia. The games in Iznik were an important step in strengthening cooperation between the countries of the Turkic world. Athletes and delegations from 102 countries participated in the event, which further increased the international dimension of the organization. During the games, in addition to traditional sports competitions, cultural events such as flavors from Turkish cuisine, folk dances, handicraft exhibitions and theater performances were organized. The Iznik Nomadic Games have been recorded as one of the most comprehensive events in the history of the Nomadic Games in terms of the number of participants and the touristic impact of the organization. The event brought tens of thousands of local and foreign tourists to the region, which made significant contributions to the local economy. At the same time, it was an important opportunity to strengthen Turkey's international promotion (Aksoy et al., 2020).

### **2024 Nomadic Games (Astana, Kazakhstan)**

The fifth Nomadic Games were held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on September 8-13, 2024, under the slogan “Meeting in the Great Steppe.” The opening ceremony of the games, where more than 2,000 athletes from 90 countries competed in 21 traditional sports, was attended by Kazakh President Kasım Komert Tokayev, many country leaders, and representatives of international organizations. President Tokayev emphasized the importance of the games in transferring traditional heritage to young generations and thanked Kyrgyzstan for initiating this organization. Kazakhstan came in first with a total of 48 medals, Kyrgyzstan came in second, and Uzbekistan came in third. Turkey completed the organization with 6 medals, while Turkish athlete Yiğit Kerem came in second in “Turkish-style horseback archery,” and Turkey defeated the USA 2-1 in the “Kökbörü” game. The “Nomads World Ethno Village” established in the event area attracted great attention (Türk Dünyası Belediyeler Birliği, 2024).

### **Traditional Sports and Events**

Nomadic Games are an important platform that introduces the thousands of years old nomadic culture of Central Asia to the modern world and ensures the preservation of the traditional values of this culture. This organization brings the sports and lifestyles developed

by nomadic peoples throughout history to the present day. Nomadic Games are not only an event that emphasizes physical endurance and skill, but also an experience that aims to establish social solidarity, harmony with nature and the transfer of cultural values. These events provide viewers with an in-depth look at the lifestyles and worldviews of nomadic societies (İmamoğlu & Taşmektepligil, 1997).

### **Kökbörü (Buzkaşı)**

Kökbörü is one of the most well-known and exciting sports of Nomadic Games. This team game played on horses tests the physical endurance, courage and strategic thinking skills of the participants. The aim of the game is to carry the goatskin to the opposing team's field. Kökbörü symbolizes the warrior identities and mutual solidarity of the nomadic communities in Central Asia. At the same time, the deep devotion of nomadic peoples to their equestrian culture is also evident in this game (Bayır & Küçükbasmacı, 2022).

### **Mounted Archery**

Mounted archery is a field in which Turks have mastered war and hunting throughout history and is of great interest in Nomadic Games. This sport demonstrates speed, balance and accuracy together. Athletes test both their physical and mental skills by shooting arrows at targets from moving horses. Mounted archery reflects the warrior traditions of nomadic culture and is also an activity that sheds light on the origins of modern archery (Polatcan, 2022).

### **Wrestling**

Wrestling is one of the most obvious indicators of the importance nomadic peoples give to physical strength and competition. Various types of wrestling in Nomadic Games carry this cultural heritage to the present day:

- **Belt Wrestling:** This type of wrestling, in which wrestlers try to knock their opponents to the ground by holding their belts, reflects the physical endurance understanding of nomadic communities.
- **Kyrgyz Wrestling:** A traditional wrestling type specific to Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz wrestling is a competition that requires both strength and technical skills.
- **Oil Wrestling:** An important part of Turkish culture, oil wrestling is an event that showcases the physical strength and aesthetic aspects of wrestlers oiled with olive oil. This traditional wrestling type also attracts great attention in Nomadic Games (İmamoğlu & Taşmektepligil, 1997).

### **Ashik Game**

Aşık game is a traditional game played by everyone from children to adults among nomadic communities. This game, in which sheep or goat bones are used, helps players develop fine motor skills, balance and targeting skills. When this game is performed in Nomadic Games, the audience is offered a nostalgic experience and a window is opened to the daily life of nomadic culture (Gül et al., 2018).

### **Eagle Hunting**

Eagle hunting is one of the activities that best reflects the lifestyles of nomadic peoples in harmony with nature. In this tradition, hunting is done using trained eagles. Eagle hunting is a powerful symbol of respect for the power of nature and human-animal cooperation. This event, which attracts great attention in the Nomadic Games, also continues to keep the traditional hunting culture alive (Güngör, 2014).

### **Traditional Arts and Crafts Events**

Nomadic Games host cultural events as well as sports. Traditional music concerts, folk dances, handicraft exhibitions and local culinary experiences are an important part of this organization. Participants have the opportunity to explore the aesthetic understanding, daily lives and beliefs of nomadic peoples more closely thanks to these events (Yalçın, 2016).

### **Horse Races and Javelin**

Horse races and javelin are an indispensable part of the lifestyle of nomadic peoples. These events reflect the basic characteristics of nomadic life such as speed, endurance and strategy. Javelin symbolizes a warrior tradition, especially in Turkish culture, and is an important sport that reinforces solidarity and entertainment among nomadic communities. These events offer both exciting moments to the audience and bear traces of traditional nomadic life in Nomadic Games (Karcıoğlu, 2017).

### **Global Reflection of Nomadic Games**

Nomadic Games serve as a bridge for the rediscovery and meaning of traditional values in the modern world. In an age where technology is rapidly advancing and globalization is homogenizing cultural differences, these games offer the opportunity to bring the rich heritage of the past together with the future. Traditional sports in particular have become an important tool in understanding the lifestyles of nomadic peoples and increasing respect for this lifestyle. In addition, the artistic dimension of Nomadic Games is also remarkable. The handicraft

exhibitions, traditional music performances, folk dances and theatrical performances organized during the games offer participants more than just a sporting event. These events highlight the aesthetic and intellectual values of nomadic cultures, arousing admiration and interest among both locals and international visitors (Buyar & Ünal, 2022). This multifaceted structure of Nomadic Games not only serves as a means of cultural preservation, but also allows for the creative interpretation of this heritage. Sharing content about the games on digital platforms and the widespread coverage of these events in global media attracts the attention of young generations in particular and enables the cultural heritage to reach wider audiences. In addition, panels, workshops and cultural conferences organized during the games offer participants the opportunity to delve deeper into nomadic cultures. Such events facilitate understanding the historical context of traditional sports and arts, while also creating significant awareness for the sustainability of this heritage. In this context, Nomadic Games aim not only to preserve and disseminate the heritage of the past, but also to solidify the place of this heritage in the modern world. These games remind us of the nature-harmonious, solidarity-oriented and unique nature of the nomadic lifestyle, and increase individuals' respect for cultural diversity. Moreover, the bonds established between people from different cultures through these events also form a strong foundation for global peace and understanding. The multi-layered structure of the Nomadic Games makes it not only an event, but also a model for cultural sustainability and international cooperation (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

### **Nomadic Games and Cultural Tourism**

Nomadic Games is an international event that draws attention with its multifaceted contributions to many different types of tourism such as cultural, sports, ecotourism and gastronomy. These games contribute significantly to the revival of cultural tourism by offering a rich content from traditional Turkish world sports to handicrafts, from folk dances to music and culinary culture. International tourists in particular have the opportunity to get to know a culture they have not had the opportunity to experience before thanks to Nomadic Games. Such events not only promote a cultural heritage but also encourage cultural interaction and heritage preservation through the participation of tourists (Maksudunov et al., 2018).

In terms of sports tourism, Nomadic Games stands out as a platform where traditional sports are presented in modern formats. Competitions such as kokbörü, mounted archery and wrestling attract the attention of both local and foreign sports enthusiasts, and thanks to these events, large audiences are attracted to the regions where the games are held. Athletes,



delegations and visitors from participating countries directly contribute to the local economy by using the hotel, restaurant and transportation services of the host country. At the same time, the fact that the games reach a wide audience on an international scale through media and digital platforms carries the touristic promotion of the host country to a global level (Türsab, 2023). For example, the Nomad Games held in İznik district of Turkey both attracted tens of thousands of tourists to the region and provided the opportunity to promote the cultural and natural beauties of İznik worldwide.

Nomad Games also play an important role in terms of sustainability. Activities that reflect a lifestyle in harmony with nature offer an environmentally friendly tourism model. The fact that traditional activities such as equestrian sports have much less impact on the environment compared to motorized sports shows the contribution of the games to ecological sustainability. In addition, the natural materials and local products used in the events organized during the games both increase environmental awareness and support local producers (Görkey, 2019). In particular, nature walks, camping activities and outdoor sports increase the importance of Nomadic Games in terms of ecotourism.

Gastronomy tourism also constitutes an important part of Nomadic Games. In the regions where the games are held, the introduction of local culinary culture provides an unforgettable experience for tourists, while strengthening cultural ties through the authentic dishes of the region. The food culture of nomadic peoples is presented to tourists with traditional recipes based on natural foods such as meat and dairy products, which revitalizes gastronomy tourism. At the same time, the markets set up during the games allow local producers to promote their products and generate income (Yıldırım & Demir, 2022).

The venues where the Nomadic Games are held are generally located in regions known for their natural beauty, which creates an attractive environment in terms of ecotourism. For example, the Issyk Kul region in Kyrgyzstan and the surroundings of Lake İznik in Turkey have increased the ecotourism potential of the region by offering tourists participating in the games an experience intertwined with nature. These games, organized in an integrated manner with nature, promote an environmentally sensitive tourism approach while also serving as a showcase that introduces the region in the international arena (Akkaya, 2020). The fact that the Nomadic Games reach a wide audience through media and digital platforms reinforces the importance of the event in terms of international promotion. Social media posts, live broadcasts and digital content increase the impact of the Nomadic Games and make significant

contributions to cultural and touristic promotion. In this context, the Iznik Nomadic Games have provided the opportunity to promote Turkey's cultural richness and natural beauties internationally, and have enabled Iznik to stand out as a tourist attraction center (Unesco, 2022).

The Nomad Games are not just a sporting event, but also a multi-dimensional organization that preserves cultural heritage, supports the local economy, stimulates tourism and strengthens international promotion. These games provide great benefits to the host countries both culturally and economically, and build a bridge globally by bringing different cultures together. Expected to reach wider audiences in the future, the Nomad Games will continue to exist as a unique model in terms of tourism sector and cultural sustainability.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nomadic Games not only ensure the survival of traditional sports, but also the transfer of the cultural heritage of nomadic peoples to the modern world. These games include elements such as traditional music, dance, handicrafts, food culture and folklore, and promote cultural diversity and historical values on a global platform. In addition, Nomadic Games offer significant opportunities in terms of tourism and economic development, and contribute to tourism by revitalizing local economies. However, some improvements are needed in terms of organization, infrastructure and education for the sustainability of the events and their effective access to large audiences. These games have great potential both culturally and economically, and the right strategies are required for them to be realized more effectively and efficiently in the future.

## **Suggestions**

- Traditional sports should be popularized by providing education on nomadic culture in schools.
- The promotion of Nomadic Games should be strengthened at the international level.
- Organizations that will encourage cultural exchange and contribute to the development of tourism should be organized.
- Environmentally friendly practices should be adopted in events and natural beauties should not be harmed.
- Nomadic Games should be promoted to wider audiences nationally and internationally through media and digital platforms.

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