



Traditional Games and the Formation of National Sports in Kyrgyz Culture

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Abstract: The article explores national sports as an integral component of cultural heritage and the historical development of physical culture in Kyrgyz society. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of traditional Kyrgyz games and household entertainments into organized national sports. The study examines the origins of sport as a regulated form of competition, tracing its evolution from ancient ritualized and everyday practices to modern institutionalized disciplines. Using historical descriptions, ethnographic evidence, and oral testimonies, the article analyzes strength-based traditional games connected with pulling objects and everyday tools, including sticks, whips, and animal hides. Special focus is given to traditional practices that later formed the foundation of the national sport known as tayak tartysh (stick pulling). The article demonstrates that the institutionalization of national sports contributes to preserving intangible cultural heritage, strengthening national identity, and promoting physical development in contemporary society. At the same time, the transition from informal entertainment to standardized sport reshapes the original cultural functions of the games and introduces new requirements related to rules, safety, and competition formats.

Keywords

national sports, traditional games, physical culture, Kyrgyz culture, ethnography of sport, sportification, cultural heritage

Introduction

Traditional amusements and folk entertainments constitute one of the earliest foundations of organized sport and sporting games. The very concept of “sport” historically refers to leisure, play, and regulated competition. Over time, what began as a form of socially meaningful entertainment developed through a long evolutionary trajectory into a global cultural phenomenon, existing in diverse forms, at different social levels, and within multiple institutional frameworks.



Sport emerged not only as a competition but also as a system of preparation and social recognition. In many societies, early sporting practices carried ritual and symbolic meanings, connecting physical performance with religious, ceremonial, or communal life. Ancient sporting traditions, particularly those associated with classical civilizations, shaped many basic principles of modern sport, including standardized rules, public spectatorship, and social prestige attached to athletic excellence.

For the Kyrgyz people, traditional games formed within nomadic life, pastoral labor, and community interaction. Many games functioned simultaneously as leisure and training: they cultivated strength, endurance, coordination, courage, and social cooperation—qualities necessary for everyday life in mobile pastoral societies. Over time, especially in the twentieth century, some of these traditional games underwent sportification, becoming formal disciplines within national sport programs.

Sport as a Cultural and Historical Phenomenon

Although modern historiography often associates the formal use of the term “sport” with later European historical periods, the deeper logic of sport—competition, preparation, and rule-based performance—has existed in human cultures for millennia. Early sport was frequently linked to ritual and collective identity. It served educational, cultural, moral, and spectacular functions, reinforcing shared values and forms of social cohesion.

Within nomadic cultures, sport-like elements often appeared through horseback practices, wrestling, and strength-based competitions. These games were not isolated from everyday life. Instead, they were integrated into seasonal cycles, social gatherings, and communal celebrations. This integration is particularly visible in the Kyrgyz context, where traditional games were historically connected to pastoral mobility, family and clan relations, and the symbolic world of customary culture.

Traditional Games and the Emergence of National Sports in Kyrgyzstan

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, a number of games that originated in traditional society are recognized as national sports. They include equestrian competitions and games, wrestling practices, intellectual games, and various strength contests. A commonly referenced list of national sports includes at chabysh, zhamby atmay, zhorgo salysh, kyz kuumai, kurosh, oodarysh, ordo, toguz korgool, tyiyn enmei, ulak tartish, and upai. Alongside these, the revival and institutionalization of pulling games using



objects of nomadic everyday life—rope, animal hide, stick, and whip—has become especially notable.

The transformation of such practices into sports reflects a broader process of cultural policy and identity-building. On one hand, sportification creates a mechanism for preserving heritage in modern conditions. On the other hand, it reshapes the original games by requiring unified rules, competition formats, safety standards, and official judging.

Pulling Games in Kyrgyz Tradition

The article focuses specifically on strength-based entertainments connected with pulling objects and tools used in household and pastoral contexts. In written sources and oral recollections, one encounters several designations for such games, including tartysh, tayak tartysh, kamchy tartysh, teri tartysh, and zhygach kurosh. Despite differences in naming and local variants, these games share a common principle—competitive pulling as a test of strength, balance, and endurance.

Pulling and Household Labor

Ethnographic evidence indicates that everyday labor activities sometimes turned into competitive entertainment. For example, in some communities people used devices for cutting hay, straw, or corn, and certain tools could also be applied in practical tasks such as processing animal hides. The act of pulling could gradually soften and lighten a hide, making it suitable for clothing or other household uses. Under certain circumstances, such labor was transformed into a contest, where participants measured strength by pulling an object to their side or forcing the opponent to lose balance.

This illustrates a key mechanism of sport formation: practical actions acquire recreational meaning; recreational meaning becomes competitive; and competition becomes regulated.

Oral Testimonies and Regional Variations

Oral testimonies provide valuable material for reconstructing the forms and meanings of traditional games. Informants describe multiple variants of pulling competitions.

One widely mentioned form is stick pulling, described under names such as zhygach karmashuu, zhygach kurosh, and kaiyrma chygaruu. It could be performed in sitting positions—where participants brace their feet against each other—or in standing positions, where victory is achieved by pulling the opponent across a control line. These



descriptions highlight that traditional games were flexible and adapted to local conditions, age groups, and communal norms.

Another variant includes whip pulling (kamchy tartysh). Informants recall that participants sat cross-legged, held a whip, and attempted to pull it away or cause the opponent to shift position or fall. While exact rules varied by location, the central principle remained consistent—competitive strength measured through regulated pulling.

Such oral evidence is important not only for describing rules but also for demonstrating how games functioned socially: they were integrated into gatherings, supported informal education of youth, and reinforced peer competition and communal entertainment.

From Traditional Entertainment to a Standardized Sport

In modern Kyrgyzstan, the ancient pulling practices have developed into an organized sporting discipline commonly known as tayak tartysh (stick pulling). Sportification required standard equipment, standardized competition space, defined judging criteria, and repeated attempts under controlled conditions.

According to contemporary competition formats described in practice, tayak tartysh involves a carpet area (commonly described as approximately 2×4 meters) with a central board for support. Participants compete barefoot in sports clothing, and the referee controls the start and the grip. Multiple attempts are usually permitted, and victory is determined by successfully pulling the stick or the opponent more times within the defined series.

This transformation demonstrates the typical characteristics of sportification:

1. Codification of rules and competition procedures.
2. Standardization of space, equipment, and judging.
3. Shift from informal entertainment to organized events such as championships and cups.
4. Emphasis on safety, fairness, and comparability of results.

Social and Cultural Significance of National Sports

The institutionalization of national sports has several major cultural and social outcomes.

First, it supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by reintroducing traditional games into modern public space. Second, it strengthens national identity by



symbolically linking contemporary society with historical forms of culture. Third, it contributes to physical development and health promotion, especially by encouraging youth participation in culturally rooted sporting activities.

At the same time, sportification also changes the original cultural context of the games. Traditional amusements once linked to household labor, seasonal mobility, or local celebrations become detached from their everyday environment and are presented in formal arenas. This shift can reduce certain symbolic or ritual aspects while increasing the visibility and sustainability of the practice in modern society.

Conclusion

Traditional Kyrgyz games have played a significant role in the historical development of physical culture and the formation of national sports. Strength-based pulling entertainments—once embedded in everyday pastoral and household life—demonstrate how labor practices can evolve into recreational contests and then into standardized sports disciplines. The case of *tayak tartysh* illustrates a broader cultural process through which traditional practices are preserved and transformed in the modern era.

The article concludes that national sports represent a dual phenomenon. They function as cultural heritage and identity resources while also operating as contemporary forms of organized physical activity. Further ethnographic documentation and comparative regional research will help refine classifications of traditional games and strengthen the academic understanding of sportification processes in Kyrgyz culture.

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