ABSTRACT
of the dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the speciality «6D020400 - Cultural Studies»
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Circus as perfomance of contemporary culture

General description of the research. This dissertation is devoted to a comprehensive examination of circus art in Kazakhstan as a unique cultural phenomenon rooted in folkloric, ritual, theatrical, and acrobatic-body traditions. The study traces the historical origins of circus practices in the cultural codes of the Great Steppe and analyzes their interrelation with the Soviet legacy. Particular attention is given to the processes of circus transformation within the post-Soviet cultural paradigm and to its role in shaping national identity. The dissertation also considers the ways in which contemporary circus art is integrated into the cultural space of Kazakhstan and beyond.

Relevance of the research. In the context of contemporary globalization, the information society, and digital media, forms of mass entertainment are in constant flux. Nevertheless, the circus, due to its performative potential, remains a rare art form that establishes a direct bodily and emotional connection with its audience. The Kazakh circus is likewise involved in these processes, searching for its own path in combining tradition and innovation. A cultural analysis of this process is particularly relevant, as it reveals not only artistic transformations but also the response of national culture to the challenges of modernity.

The study of circus art in Kazakhstan is not merely an art historical endeavor but also a socio-cultural task. The circus functions not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a form of collective memory, ritual practice, and a means of shaping national identity. In this regard, circus performance makes it possible to trace both the consequences of Soviet-era cultural policies and the tensions between artistic freedom and market demands in the period of independence.

Degree of research on the topic. For a long time, circus art remained outside the scope of social and humanities research, especially in Kazakhstan and the post-Soviet space. Only from the Soviet period did it become an independent object of analysis: the works of E.M. Kuznetsov, A.V. Lunacharsky, N.A. Khrenov, J. Dominique, R.E. Slavsky, A.Ya. Shneer, Z.B. Gurevich, F.G. Bardian, S. Makarov, M. Nemchinsky, V. Barinov, E. Gortinsky, L.S. Babushkin and others described the circus as a syncretic art and substantiated its educational and ideological potential. Among Russian researchers, the works of O.S. Klepatskaya, O.V. Pyataeva, O.D. Burenina-Petrova, L.V. Toroptseva, I.V. Sherpilova, E.V. Shumakova have established a solid theoretical and historical foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the circus phenomenon.

In international scholarship, the circus has begun to be interpreted from new perspectives - through semiotics, performance theory, and body theory. P. Bouissac considers the circus as a system of signs and a space of visual communication; P. Tait explores the intersection of body and cultural identity in “aero-performance”; M. Neirick describes the ideological structure of the Soviet circus; S. Ward presents the circus as a tool for producing collective memory and national narrative. The performativity concepts of J. Austin and J. Butler made it possible to view circus stage action as a mechanism for

constructing social reality. Likewise, works by L. Stephens, G. Arrighi, H. Zisman, E. Fischer-Lichte, and others analyze the circus as a form of contemporary cultural performance, an ethical practice, and a site of intercultural encounter.

Within the Kazakhstani academic field, the works of A.R. Massalimova, A.T. Kulsariyeva, Zh.A. Altaev, T.Kh. Gabitov, Z.N. Ismagambetova, G.K. Abdigalieva, A.K. Karabayeva, K.A. Zatov and others interpret circus art as a continuation of the civilization of the Great Steppe and as part of its value system. Foundational studies of Kazakhstan's traditional culture by A. Zatayevich, A. Zhubanov, S. Mukanov, M. Auezov, and M. Magauin constitute the theoretical base of this dissertation. Among domestic works on the Kazakh circus, the monographs of K. Begenov and N. Bokebayev, as well as the research of D.K. Dosbatyrov, are of particular importance.

Aim and objectives of the research. This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive cultural analysis of Kazakh circus art as a unique cultural phenomenon formed at the intersection of steppe traditions, the Soviet circus school, and contemporary transformations of identity. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are set:

- to examine the circus as a performative phenomenon within the framework of the contemporary cultural paradigm;
- to substantiate the interdisciplinary nature of circus studies and define a set of methodological approaches (structural-functional, hermeneutic, ethnographic, and performance analysis) for analyzing it as a living cultural practice;
- to reveal the analytical potential of the concept of performativity in the study of the circus phenomenon, considering the circus as a form of cultural poiesis that generates meaning, identity, and emotional engagement;
- to identify the origins of circus art in the culture of the Great Steppe and analyze traditional performative practices as the historical and cultural foundation of artistic forms specific to the Kazakh circus;

to study the images of *sal-seri*, *aghashayak*, *qu-shanshar*, and other steppe tricksters as cultural predecessors of circus artists, and to reveal their artistic and worldview functions within the system of Kazakh performative culture;

- to consider *argymak* artistry as a key form of performativity, rooted in *dzhigitovka* and tracing back to the tradition of horse domestication on the Kazakh steppe (Botai culture);
- to analyze the cultural characteristics of the Kazakh circus during the Soviet period and identify the ways in which ethnic imagery and repertoire specificity were preserved and adapted despite the ideological standards of the time;
- based on ethnographic research, to study the Kazakh State Circus in the post-Soviet period as an institution representing national identity, and to analyze its strategies of cultural transformation, stage ethnic imagery, and emotional communication with the audience;
- to examine the phenomenon of *Nomad Stunts* as an example of contemporary circus cultural entrepreneurship and a performative brand, and to determine the ways in which elements of traditional art and cultural symbols are effectively integrated into the global media space, cinema, and cultural diplomacy.

Object and subject of the research. The object of the research is circus art as a socio-cultural, artistic, and identificational phenomenon of Kazakhstan.

The **subject** of the research is the cultural, philosophical, performative, and anthropological foundations of the processes of formation, transformation, and functioning of Kazakhstani circus art in historical and contemporary periods. Within the scope of the study, institutional practices of the circus, symbolic forms, ethnic images, and strategies of cultural representation are examined.

Theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. The theoretical basis of this dissertation relies on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural studies, philosophy of culture, socio-cultural anthropology, postcolonial and post-Soviet studies, performance theory, and circus studies.

Scientific novelty of the research. In the course of achieving the aims and objectives set out in the dissertation, the following scientific results were obtained:

1. For the first time in the Kazakhstani context, circus art is examined not only as an artistic spectacle or mass entertainment, but as a performative phenomenon within contemporary culture, where action, image, and ritual converge, and where struggles over meaning and symbolic reconfigurations take place.

2. An interdisciplinary methodological framework has been formulated for the first time, enabling a comprehensive understanding of circus art. The study integrates approaches from cultural studies, philosophy, social anthropology, performance analysis, and qualitative ethnography, allowing the circus to be conceptualized as a "living cultural practice" and a relevant object of theoretical reflection.

3. The significance of the concept of performativity in circus art is analyzed in detail. Circus performance is considered not as a simple show but as a cultural performance generating meaning, emotions, and identity. Drawing on the theories of John Austin, Judith Butler, and Richard Schechner, the circus is interpreted as a stage action realized through bodily expression, closely linked to ritual, and imparting social meaning.

4. Based on traditional performative practices - *zhyrau* recitation, *aitys*, *baksy* rituals, and national games - the study demonstrates how artistic codes specific to the Kazakh circus were formed. For the first time, the artistry of *sal-seri*, strongmen, and trickster practices is systematically analyzed, revealing their performative, ritual, and cultural functions as the foundations of circus stage thinking and artistic structures.

5. The concept of "Steppe circus" is introduced into academic circulation, describing the repertoire, stage conventions, and aesthetic codes distinguishing it from the classical European circus. For the first time, the images of *sal-seri*, *aghashayak*, and *qu-shanshar* are comprehensively studied as cultural predecessors of circus artists, with their artistic and worldview functions situated within the traditional performative culture of the Kazakhs.

6. A historical and cultural trajectory of *argymak* artistry is constructed - from the era of horse domestication in the Botai culture to modern circus acrobatics. *Argymak* art is presented not only as bodily mastery but also as an aesthetic system imbued with sacred codes and symbolic motifs.

7. It is theoretically substantiated that within the Soviet ideological discourse, the circus functioned not only as a platform of propaganda but also as an instrument for representing and preserving national identity. The circus space simultaneously operated as a stage of socialist utopia and as a performative medium for the implicit transmission of ethnocultural content.

8. On the basis of ethnographic materials and analysis of performances, the Kazakh State Circus is characterized as a cultural institution representing national identity. Its transformation into a performative platform that today revitalizes cultural heritage in contemporary language and reconfigures national codes in stage form is demonstrated.

9. The international stunt group *Nomad Stunts* is for the first time described as an example of contemporary circus-based cultural entrepreneurship and as a performative brand. Their creative practice is analyzed as a successful integration of Kazakh trick artistry and ethno-aesthetic imagery into the global spaces of film, media, and cultural diplomacy.

Key Scientific Findings Submitted for Defense:

1. Within the modern cultural paradigm, circus art is characterized not only as a spectacle for audiences but also as a performative phenomenon that unites physical action, ritual, and artistic performance. In the 21st century, the circus arena has transformed into a space of contestation over meanings, where artists, directors, spectators, and organizers jointly create and reconfigure cultural codes. Performances based on corporeality, stage narratives, and the visual-acoustic aesthetics of the circus enable contemporary society to reinterpret the past and model cultural images of the future.

2. Circus art is examined from interdisciplinary perspectives at the intersection of cultural studies, philosophical anthropology, aesthetics, semiotics, and social approaches. On this basis, the complex structure of the circus as a performative space is substantiated. The circus stage is presented not merely as an arena of entertainment but also as a cultural space that generates ritual practices, symbolic meanings, and emotional-corporeal connections. Circus performance is defined as a historically established artistic form that represents meanings and evokes collective emotions.

3. From the perspective of performativity theory, the circus is for the first time conceptualized as a form of cultural poiesis that produces meaning, emotions, and identity. The notion of performance makes it possible to interpret the circus not only as a form of spectacle but also as a site for the formation of social reality. The artistic action and stage space of the circus are described as performative structures that transmit cultural codes, ethnic roles, and ideological meanings to the audience.

4. It has been demonstrated that the historical foundations of the artistic codes of the Kazakh circus were formed on the basis of traditional performative practices such as *zhyrau* (epic singing), *aitys* (improvised poetic duels), *baksylyk* (shamanic practices), and national games. The research reveals the ethnohistorical and ritual origins of the circus, allowing Kazakh stage art to be understood as a “living” repertoire. Bodily actions and stage structures of the circus are shown to be continuations of the syncretism of traditional culture, and their transformation within the modern circus has been theoretically substantiated. In this way, the genesis of performativity and the artistic language of the Kazakh circus has been clarified.

5. The figures of *sal-seri* (wandering bards), *agashayaq* (stilt-walkers), and *qu-shanshar* (folk clowns and jesters) are for the first time comprehensively studied as cultural-historical prototypes of the Kazakh circus. They are described not only as creators of artistic images but also as steppe tricksters who performed aesthetic, worldview, and social functions. Their creative activity - through laughter, critique, ritual, and poetic word - served as an important mechanism for representing social reality and collective

experience. On this basis, the continuity between traditional prototypes and circus artists is clarified, and the origins and performative nature of national circus art are revealed.

6. The art of *argymak* (equestrian mastery) is traced back to the era of horse domestication in the Botai culture. Kazakh *zhigitovka* (equestrian acrobatics) is presented not merely as horseback acrobatics but as an artistic-ritual practice expressing ethnic codes and ideals. It embodies not only bodily mastery and balance but also national identity, heroism, and harmony with nature. In the modern Kazakh circus, *zhigitovka* remains one of the essential elements of visual identity and the performative language, acquiring symbolic significance as a marker of connection with national culture.

7. Despite strict ideological restrictions, the Kazakh circus of the Soviet period preserved and adapted ethnocultural codes through its repertoire, stage images, and artistic solutions. The circus stage simultaneously served as a tool of socialist propaganda and as a performative medium for the implicit transmission of national traditions, including music, imagery, and acrobatic heritage. Under these conditions, a Kazakh circus school was formed that combined the requirements of the Soviet system with ethnic specificity, contributing to the development of stage language and artistic methods.

8. In the post-Soviet period, the Kazakh State Circus has become an important cultural institution of national identity representation. For the first time, processes of cultural reconfiguration within the circus have been studied ethnographically and through performance analysis. The identity transformation of the circus has been systematized into stages of "strategic analysis," "positive demontage," "creative synthesis," and "identity reinforcement," and interpreted as a process of epigenetic change—from the rejection of Soviet heritage to the stage representation of new national content. Contemporary productions such as *Scythia*, *Yer Tostik*, and *The Snow Queen* are shown as adaptations of fairy tales, epics, and narratives into a new stage format aimed at reviving national aesthetics and aligning stage language with the Kazakh worldview.

9. The international stunt group *Nomad Stunts* is characterized as a unique example of a modern circus performative brand and cultural entrepreneurship. For the first time, their creative practice is analyzed as the successful integration of traditional nomadic stunts and ethno-aesthetic imagery into the global space of cinema, media, and cultural diplomacy. The study demonstrates that their organizational structure, training infrastructure, and stage language have generated new forms of cultural productivity, securing worldwide recognition.

Practical Significance of the Research. The practical significance of the study is manifested in several directions: supporting and institutionally strengthening the circus in Kazakhstan as part of the national cultural code; introducing specialized courses in the fields of art studies and cultural studies; adapting traditional forms within the modern stage practice of circus pedagogy and directing; developing ethno-oriented brands and transmedia projects (following the example of *Nomad Stunts*) within the sphere of creative industries and cultural entrepreneurship; and employing the circus as an instrument of "soft power" in international cultural diplomacy. Thus, the results of the dissertation possess the potential for application not only in deepening theoretical knowledge but also in the fields of cultural policy, education, and creative practice.

Approbation and Approval of the Research Work. The main scientific results and conclusions of the dissertation have been published in 7 scientific works: 1 article in a journal indexed in the Scopus database, 2 articles in journals recommended by the

Committee for Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1 monograph, and 3 articles in the proceedings of international scientific conferences.

Structure of the Dissertation. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three sections, nine chapters, a list of references, and appendices.