

KAZAKH FOLKLORE AND THE WORLDVIEW: TRADITIONS, SYMBOLS, AND IDENTITY*

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Abstract. This article focuses on the concept of the «world picture» as reflected in Kazakh oral literature, examining its formation within a historical and cultural framework. The study investigates the diverse geographical motifs, and narrative themes present in Kazakh folklore, emphasizing their links to broader Turkic-Mongolian and Eurasian traditions. Through a comparative-typological lens, the research explores the structural and symbolic dimensions of epic storytelling. The analysis demonstrates how the «world picture» and cultural codes are interwoven in folklore, shaping collective memory and contributing to the evolution of sacred meanings. The results provide new perspectives on how oral heritage influences the ongoing development of cultural identity.

Keywords: world picture, Kazakh oral literature, folklore, Turkic-Mongolian traditions, Eurasian context, comparative-typological analysis, cultural codes, symbolism, identity.

Introduction

The modern scholarly approach to describing the «world picture» aligns closely with the discipline of the history of philosophy. Prominent philosophers such as Herder, Hegel, Spengler, Toynbee, and Jaspers have employed panoramic perspectives alongside comparative methodologies to depict historical chronotopes effectively. When exploring the concept of the world picture within philosophical history, it is essential to clearly differentiate between philosophical reflection, historical sources, and cultural models. This differentiation helps clarify the scope and significance of each conceptual category.

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Arnold Toynbee's analysis provides a relevant illustration of such cultural depiction, detailing the temporal and typological dynamics of civilization histories [2, p.100]. Notably, the term «world picture» is prominently featured in Romano Guardini's research, emphasizing its universal cultural significance rather than restricting it to a singular scholarly domain.

In this context, the methodological framework of cultural typology is fundamental to understanding the world picture. Within Kazakh scholarship, this approach was initially proposed in linguistics and philology, exemplified notably in Shaken Ibrayev's seminal work «The World of Epos»[1, p.44].

Conducting a diachronic analysis of historical typology inherently necessitates a complementary synchronic approach. Examining historical typology within folklore requires a thorough understanding of textual peculiarities where specific phenomena are described. The systematic organization of collected data by internal and external features, genre, plot-compositional structures, and artistic techniques underscores the necessity for synchronic analysis. It is critical to recognize that folklore represents a structural system composed of distinct phenomena, which do not necessarily require analysis in motion to achieve comprehension. Ibrayev [2] asserts that diachronic and synchronic historical typologies, along with structural typology, are integrally connected and mutually reinforcing within specific research contexts.

Typological and Structural Analysis in the Study of Folklore

The classification and interpretation of folklore materials require not only historical contextualization but also a nuanced understanding of their internal symbolic and structural features. Systematizing the collected data according to internal and external characteristics - such as genre, narrative-compositional logic, and the function of artistic techniques - necessitates the use of synchronic analysis.

Unlike historical artifacts that require temporal sequencing to make sense, folklore, as a symbolic and performative system, is better understood when considered in its structural integrity at a given moment. As Ibrayev [2] notes, «Diachronic and synchronic historical typology, together with structural typology, are closely connected in the course of specific research and therefore they complement each other» [1, p. 44]. This methodological triad ensures that the symbolic *structure* of folklore is analyzed both in its internal coherence and in relation to its historical transformations.

Table 1. Typology of Civilizations by Cultural and Symbolic Affiliation (based on historical-anthropological models)

№	Civilization	Descriptive Attribution (historical-anthropological context)
1	Hellenic	Classical Greco-Mediterranean tradition
2	Western	Latin-Christian heritage of Europe

3	Egyptian	Nile Valley civilization with syncretic Afro-Mediterranean roots
4	Sumerian	Proto-Mesopotamian symbolic and technological model
5	Minoan	Aegean-ritualistic civilization with advanced maritime culture
6	Indian (Vedic)	Composite Indo-Aryan and Dravidian philosophical-symbolic system
7	Hittite	Anatolian cultural synthesis with legal codification traditions
8	Far Eastern (Korea/Japan)	Sinic-based symbolic synthesis with indigenous mythological structures
9	Orthodox (mainstream)	Byzantine-Slavic liturgical worldview
10	Orthodox (Russia)	Eurasian-Christian spiritual hybrid model
11	Iranian	Zoroastrian and Islamic-philosophical synthesis
12	Babylonian	Mesopotamian astronomical and epic model
13	Syrian	Semitic-symbolic tradition and early Christian worldview
14	Arab	Classical Islamic civilization and Qur'anic cosmology
15	Indian (late)	Philosophical synthesis under Islamic and colonial influence
16	Chinese	Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist triad of moral cosmology
17	Far Eastern (main)	Continuity of East Asian cosmological traditions
18	Andean	Nature-centered worldview with vertical symbolism (e.g., Pachamama)
19	Mayan	Mesoamerican cyclical cosmology with mathematical-astronomical focus
20	Yucatan	Ritualized agrarian worldview of the Maya
21	Mexican	Hybrid civilizational narrative with Aztec-Spanish syncretism

This adapted table avoids outdated racial classifications and instead foregrounds cultural-symbolic models rooted in civilizational narratives, mythopoetic cosmologies, and spiritual traditions. It aligns with contemporary scholarship's movement away from essentialist or biological categorization toward interpretative, typological, and symbolic frameworks.

Such a typology contributes to the understanding of how different civilizations have historically articulated their *world picture* - in Cassirer's sense - as symbolic structures that shape collective memory, moral imagination, and cosmological orientation.

Explanation of the choice of topic, definition of goals and objectives

As is widely recognized, religious descriptions of the world emphasize creative imagery, scientific descriptions focus on rational interpretation, while philosophical descriptions prioritize reflective reasoning. Cultural depictions, in turn, foreground a comparative typological representation of human existence. In the pre-Islamic worldviews of Turkic peoples, interpretations of space and time, humanity, and the universe through divine symbols illustrate a transition from zoomorphic imagery to anthropomorphic representations, forming a distinctive logic within the Turkic worldview.

Syncretic symbols dominate cultural images of Central Asia shaped under Islamic influence. For example, the concept of «Zheti kat kok» («Seven Layers of the Blue») synthesizes the divine essence of Tengrianism with the Islamic concept of divine radiance [11].

The concept of a free, courageous, and strong individual is central to descriptions of the world picture in the era of the Kazakh Khanate. However, interpreting nomadic philosophy exclusively through Western theoretical frameworks (such as postmodern nomadic theory) presents considerable limitations.

Kazakh intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alongside symbols of enlightenment, emphasized preserving traditional cultural values, including morality, community cohesion, and individual virtues such as decency, contentment, and happiness. The «Field Education» system, which gained prominence in Kazakh cultural and philosophical literature, reflects symbolic, particularistic, and tribal perspectives on genealogies, legends, and traditional covenants.

Given that cultural principles, universal symbols, and worldviews within Kazakh philosophy remain insufficiently defined, this study aims to identify a unified conceptual world picture that adequately addresses these gaps. The dominant Western paradigm of world depiction, grounded in rationality, might explain why nomadic Kazakh culture, relying heavily on symbolic rather than rational structures, faces challenges in contemporary development.

Methodology

This study explores the foundational structures of world depiction in cultural and traditional perspectives, drawing insights from notable scholars such as A. Nauryzbayeva, R. Guardini, Sh. Ibrayev, A. Toynbee, and K. Jaspers. These authors provided detailed descriptions of historical chronotopes through comparative and panoramic methods. Developing core principles of Kazakh philosophy and cultural studies necessitates clarifying symbolic representations that illustrate universal human-world relationships.

In the West, the culmination and ensuing crisis of the modern individual arise from rationalist paradigms. Conversely, the crisis within nomadic Kazakh culture emerges from contemporary demands challenging its symbolic foundations, compounded by the difficulty of aligning with Western rational paradigms [5; 8; 23].

Only recently have cultural depictions become central in scholarly analyses. Western cultural studies initiated extensive discourse on this topic after Guardini's influential work, *The End of the Modern World*[5]. Cultural scholar A. Nauryzbayeva defines world pictures as typical symbolic representations of changing realities, resulting from internal perceptions of being [23, p. 300]. Guardini's work vividly illustrates symbolic perceptions of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity in Western contexts.

According to *The Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, the «world picture» concept refers to models representing historical periods within cultural typologies [4, p. 46]. The term encapsulates attempts to transcend the narrow boundaries of rational paradigms dominant in contemporary non-classical cultural studies. Guardini posits that Western («Faustian») individuals perceive the world primarily as a testing ground for their experiential pursuits, doubting divine omnipotence and dismissing eschatological notions. Consequently, humans claim absolute freedom, redefining the world from a divinely created entity to a mere natural environment they control. Such a perspective precipitates a spiritual decline, compelling modern individuals to seek renewed spiritual connections and new transcendental meanings [5; 9, p. 47].

Historical typology, as variant world descriptions, has proven effective within linguoculturology due to its extensive use of comparative approaches. Notably, researcher G. N. Potanin systematically explored thematic similarities across medieval European epics, employing comparative methods to discern cultural commonalities and divergences [8, p. 36].

Another critical symbolic concept migrating from cultural linguistics into broader cultural studies is Bakhtin's «chronotope», defined as the unity of time and space articulated within literary and artistic compositions. According to Bakhtin, chronotopes structurally organize narratives by embedding temporal dimensions within spatial contexts, thereby making time perceptible through spatial representation [7, p. 82].

D.S. Likhachev further categorizes literary time into four distinct modes:

- Plot time
- Authorial time (specific to written texts)
- Performer's time (pertinent to oral narratives)
- Audience's time (listeners' interpretative experience).

These classifications transcend grammatical categories, emphasizing narrative structures [7, p. 83].

Toynbee emphasizes cultural chronotopes' lifecycle—formation, adaptation, and eventual decline—as a response to environmental and historical demands. When a culture's symbolic structure becomes inadequate, it inevitably faces crises, facilitating the rise of new symbolic frameworks [10].

Karl Jaspers, in his seminal work *The Origin and Goal of History*, describes world cultural development's logic, particularly emphasizing prophetic roles in spiritual transformation throughout history. Jaspers' theoretical model (Figure 1) visually depicts these transformative processes [6; 2, p. 55].

Figure 1. Model of historical development (according to K. Jaspers)

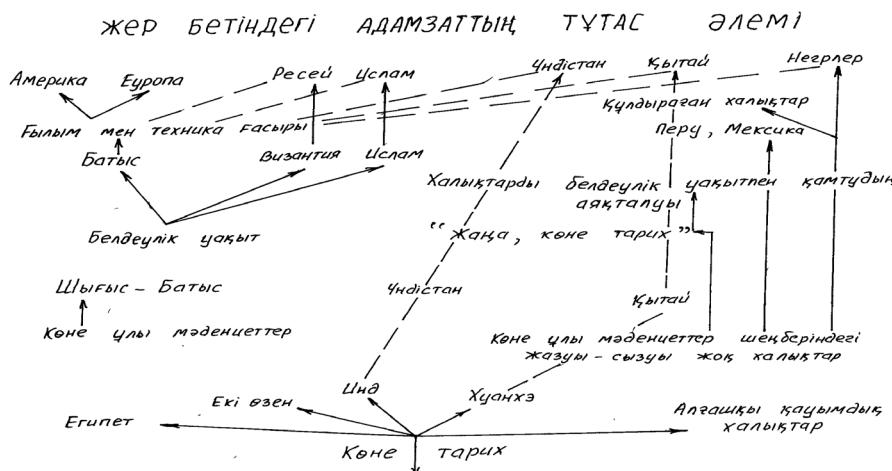


Figure 1 illustrates Karl Jaspers' conceptual model of historical development, emphasizing transformative periods where cultural breakthroughs (Axial Ages) significantly shift humanity's spiritual consciousness. Jaspers identifies multiple axial periods, characterized by the emergence of profound philosophical and religious innovations. This model underscores cyclic processes marked by spiritual awakenings, followed by stabilization phases, and eventual declines necessitating further cultural renewals [6; 2; 3].

Jaspers argues that each axial transformation expands human awareness, fostering interconnected global worldviews. These transformative periods are pivotal, enabling civilizations to redefine their existential frameworks and symbolic structures. The Axial Age (approximately 800–200 BCE) exemplifies such transformations, producing foundational philosophical and religious traditions across diverse civilizations, including Greece, India, China, and the Middle East [6].

Jaspers' model provides a theoretical foundation to examine cultural transformations within Kazakh folklore, particularly how traditional symbolic representations undergo historical shifts while retaining essential meanings. By situating Kazakh oral literature within this broader historical-cultural framework, we can better understand the dynamics shaping symbolic worldviews and their influence on contemporary cultural identities.

Results and Discussion

In European philosophical tradition, particularly within the Enlightenment and classical German idealism, reason is regarded as humanity's highest intellectual faculty. In the works of philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, reason becomes a central organizing force, structuring the infinite and unified nature of subjective experience. Hegel famously articulates this perspective in his assertion that «what is rational is real, and what is real is rational», highlighting the identity between rational thought and the structure of reality itself [15, p. 20].

Nonetheless, twentieth-century philosophers increasingly challenged the dominance of rationalist paradigms. Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, existentialists, intuitionists, and postmodern thinkers emphasized the importance of human dimensions beyond pure rationality, acknowledging the significance of intuitive, symbolic, and existential aspects of human experience [18; 14].

In philosophical and scientific world pictures, cultural and civilizational images encapsulate universal structures of human-world relationships. While religious depictions focus on divine creation, and scientific frameworks pursue objective truth, philosophical interpretations stress reflective reasoning. Cultural studies, by contrast, prioritize symbolic representations that illustrate typical human experiences within specific historical contexts.

To illustrate these cultural typologies, Russian scholars Yugai and Pak offer comparative analyses of world cultures, evaluating their internal symbolic principles and degrees of intercultural openness. The summarized typology presented below (Table 2) highlights cultural distinctions based on these criteria [19].

Table 2. Comparative Characteristics of World Cultures

Principles of Dialogue and Cultural Synthesis	Types of Culture
Equality in cultural dialogue	Ancient Greco-Roman culture: emphasis on rationalism, internal dialogue, and the «religion of reason.»
Prolonged synthesis leading to stagnation	Tibetan culture (a synthesis of Chinese and Indian traditions); Byzantine culture (East-West fusion).
Maximum openness or closure in interethnic relations; mastered flexible synthesis	Soviet multinational culture; Japanese Shinto culture blended with Zen Buddhism and Western science.
Excessive openness threatening national traditions	Jewish, Armenian, and South Korean cultures: spiritually open but preserving ethnic identity.
Self-sufficiency of ancient great civilizations	Chinese and Indian civilizations: deep-rooted symbolic and philosophical systems.
Prototype displacement and cultural disintegration under external influence	Javanese-Indonesian culture: successive overlays of Buddhism, Shaivism, Islam, and Western ideologies.
Self-destructive greatness	Russian culture: profound and complete, with deep mysticism, moral vision, and spiritual ambivalence.
Technological domination and spiritual borrowing	Western civilization: rational and economic dominance, yet borrowing spiritual practices from the East.

Adapted from Yugai and Pak [19].

This comparison reveals two key insights. First, every ethnoculture constructs its own world picture grounded in its intrinsic symbolic values. Second, these symbolic structures reflect each culture's readiness for dialogue and its ability to assimilate external influences. Contemporary world pictures are significantly influenced by political ideologies, sometimes overshadowing traditional symbolic narratives. The moral implications of this shift remain complex and controversial.

Addressing the interplay of symbolism and politics necessitates defining clear moral and cultural boundaries. According to Max Weber (as cited in Nauryzbayeva, 8), those seeking inner peace should refrain from engaging in politics due to its inherent conflict between moral ideals and practical expediency. This inherent tension underscores the necessity for cultural studies to preserve symbolic dimensions when analyzing modernity.

Symbolism and the World Picture

Although symbolism itself is not the exclusive focus of this study, its integral role within cultural analysis deserves attention. Mutalipov [3] emphasizes symbolism as central to modern cultural studies, highlighting Ernst Cassirer's concept of the «symbolic form», in which human consciousness situates symbols at the core of cultural understanding [13].

Cassirer's «Philosophy of Symbolic Forms» argues that humans engage the world primarily through symbolic mediation, rendering culture fundamentally semiotic [13]. V. Rudnev similarly describes symbolism as a hierarchy of cultural texts, interpreting reality through transcendent symbols rather than literal depictions [9]. Symbolism, therefore, is foundational in articulating deeper meanings inaccessible through direct representation alone.

Kazakh philosopher B.K. Baizhigitov extends symbolic interpretation to traditional Kazakh visual arts. Each color in Kazakh ornaments carries specific symbolic meanings: blue symbolizes sky and life; red, fire and the sun; black, earth and prosperity; white, happiness and purity; yellow, wisdom; and green symbolizes renewal and well-being [12; 16].

Symbolic expressions in Kazakh culture also encompass numeric symbolism. For instance, Garifolla Yessimov recounts how traditional Kazakh leader Tole Bi cryptically invoked numbers at crucial meetings, symbolically communicating complex cultural codes [11, p. 41].

It is crucial to distinguish between various symbolic concepts (raemiz, tanba, belgi, beyne, ulgi), each signifying nuanced symbolic dimensions in Kazakh culture. According to Alexei Losev, a symbol differs from other signs by its inherent ambiguity, systematic openness, and deep cultural resonance [17].

Cassirer's observation that «every individual lives within their own symbolic universe» underscores symbolism's subjective and culturally contingent nature, shaping individual and collective identities [13, p. 42].

Thus, symbolism emerges as the primary structural foundation within cultural depictions of reality, facilitating deeper meanings and reflecting broader socio-cultural contexts.

Conclusion

In this article, the concepts of «world picture» and «symbolism» have been explored in detail, emphasizing their integral role in Kazakh oral literature and broader cultural studies. Our analysis highlights how the symbolic structures embedded within traditional Kazakh culture reflect a nomadic worldview, constituting a fundamental archetype central to Kazakh identity.

The versatility of symbolic images does not imply a mere representation of national specificity; rather, symbols function as foundational structures that transcend immediate cultural boundaries. Baizhigitov's definition clearly illustrates this point: symbols within Kazakh culture encapsulate complex interrelations formed through the historical interaction between humans and their environment, solidified over time into enduring cultural meanings [12, p. 192].

Symbolism in Kazakh culture extends beyond visual representation, encompassing numeric symbolism and conceptual structures that communicate deeper, often implicit meanings. Such symbolic logic was vividly exemplified by historical figures such as Tole Bi, whose numeric symbolism functioned as a nuanced form of communication and cultural transmission [11].

Furthermore, the comparative-typological analysis used throughout this research provides evidence of profound connections between Kazakh folklore and wider Turkic-Mongolian and Eurasian traditions. This interconnectedness underscores the cultural exchanges and symbolic dialogues that shape Kazakh cultural identity, influencing its historical perceptions and spiritual narratives.

Symbolism's inherent flexibility allows Kazakh cultural identity to remain adaptive yet distinctive. This dual capacity - adaptability and distinctiveness - positions symbolic structures as crucial in preserving cultural integrity amidst modern globalizing forces. The analysis herein suggests that despite political influences increasingly shaping contemporary symbolic narratives, traditional symbolic structures retain their core significance within Kazakh cultural consciousness.

Future research might benefit from exploring how evolving symbolic interpretations influence Kazakh cultural identity within a rapidly globalizing context, providing deeper insight into the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity.

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Қазақ фольклоры және дүниетаным: дәстүрлер, рәміздер және бірегейлік**

Аңдатта. Мақалада қазақтың ауыз әдебиетінде «әлемнің картинасы» ұғымының қалыптасуы мен көрінісі тарихи-мәдени түрғыдан талданады. Зерттеуде қазақ фольклорындағы географиялық және тақырыптық әртүрлілік, сондай-ақ оның түркі-монгол және еуразиялық мәдени дәстүрлерімен байланысы қарастырылады. Салыстырмалы-типологиялық әдіс арқылы әпикалық шығармалардың құрылымдық және символикалық ерекшеліктері ашылады. Таңдау барысында «әлемнің картинасы» мен мәдени кодтардың ауызша мәтіндерге қалай енгени, олардың ұжымдық жад пен қасиетті мағыналардың жаңғыруына әсері анықталады. Бұл нәтижелер ауызша мұраның мәдени бірегейлікті дамытудағы және түрлендірудегі рөлін жаңаша түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: әлемнің картинасы, қазақ ауыз әдебиеті, фольклор, түркі-монгол дәстүрлері, еуразиялық контекст, салыстырмалы-типологиялық талдау, мәдени кодтар, символика, бірегейлік.

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Казахский фольклор и мировоззрение: традиции, символы и идентичность**

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается формирование и отражение «картины мира» в казахской устной литературе сквозь призму историко-культурного анализа. Исследование уделяет внимание разнообразию географических мотивов и тематических линий казахского фольклора, а также его взаимодействию с тюрко-монгольскими и евразийскими культурными традициями. На основе сравнительно-типологического метода раскрываются особенности структуры и символики эпических произведений. Анализ показывает, как «картина мира» и культурные коды интегрируются в устные тексты, формируя коллективную память и способствуя переосмыслинию сакральных смыслов. Полученные результаты позволяют по-новому взглянуть на роль устного наследия в развитии и трансформации культурной идентичности.

Ключевые слова: картина мира, казахская устная литература, фольклор, тюрко-монгольские традиции, евразийский контекст, сравнительно-типологический анализ, культурные коды, символика, идентичность.

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