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Re-imagining national identity through early literacy textbooks in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, its schools have undergone major changes in terms of curriculum content and teaching/learning process, reflecting the movement from Soviet educational ideals towards Western, democracy-oriented ones. In this context, it is important to study the changes in school textbooks on the topic of nationalism, particularly early literacy textbooks in primary schools.

In this paper I analyze texts and illustrations in early literacy textbooks used in Kazakh and Russian speaking schools on the topic of “building” a citizen of the newly independent nation-state. Using convenience sampling, a total of 15 early literacy

textbooks published in independent Kazakhstan were collected and analyzed. The textbooks and early literacy textbooks analyzed here were printed by main publishing houses such as Mektep, Rauan, Atamura and Almatykitap. Kazakhstani textbooks can be published in four languages in Kazakhstan: Kazakh (state), Russian (language of inter-ethnic communication), Uighur and Uzbek. This study deals with early literacy textbooks written in Kazakh and Russian languages because most children learn in those two languages. It is very hard to acquire textbooks published in Uighur and Uzbek languages because they are not printed in large quantities and are less often reprinted.

Given that education in Kazakhstan follows the government approved national curriculum, where state approved textbooks used across all schools in the country, the sample for this research is representative. The findings reveal that early literacy textbooks in Kazakhstan - both in Kazakh and Russian speaking schools - are increasingly Kazakhified and focus primarily on Kazakh ethnicity, despite the state's rhetoric on multiculturalism. Using critical discourses analysis, I show here how school textbooks contribute to the construction of Kazakh national identity through a particular conception of (national) childhood, homeland, and symbols.

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the notion of national identity in the newly independent Central Asian country of Kazakhstan has been continuously rethought, reimagined, and redefined. Due to its complex history, Kazakhstan is a highly diverse multiethnic society, which is home to 125 so-called ethnicities or nationalities¹. The problem of collective national identity formation – a shared cultural perception by a group of people that they form a nation – is one of the priorities for the highly centrist government of Kazakhstan, which aims to unite the

diverse Kazakhstani population during the post-Soviet nation building process.

One of the central mechanisms for shaping a sense of nationhood is through the educational system. It has been so since the beginnings of industrialized society. In the words of Gellner (1983): “The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important than the monopoly of legitimate violence. When this is understood, then the imperative of nationalism, its roots, not in human nature as such, but in a certain kind of now pervasive social order, can also be understood” (p.34). Primary education is free and compulsory in Kazakhstan. The net enrolment ratio in primary school of both males and female is 99.4%, while the survival rate to last primary grade is 100% (UNICEF, 2014). This means that the overwhelming majority of Kazakhstani children are participating in early education and all who join primary education successfully finish it. Textbooks constitute the major

¹ Detailed description on ethnic composition of Kazakhstan at <http://www1.unece.org/stat/platform/download/attachments/64881183/Kaz2009%20Analytical%20report.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1330590038432&api=v2>

component of school curriculum. The role of early literacy textbooks is hard to underestimate, since children read and interact with early literacy textbooks while at school. Since the educational system is centralized in Kazakhstan, textbooks distributed by main publishing houses are then used in most schools across the country. Consequently, cultural and ideological messages in early literacy textbooks are transmitted to every classroom in Kazakhstan, shaping national identity of young Kazakhstanis.

Acknowledging the critical role of textbooks in the process of national identity building, this study contributes to and expands the existing research on early literacy textbooks (early literacy textbooks that are used in the first grade) in Central Asia. The aim of this research study is to analyze how early literacy textbooks contribute to national identity formation in the context of post-Soviet transformations in Kazakhstan. Textbooks are published in 4 languages in Kazakhstan: Kazakh (state), Russian (language of inter-ethnic communication), Uighur, and Uzbek. This study deals with early literacy textbooks written in Kazakh and Russian languages only because most children learn in those two languages: more than 1,600,000 study in Kazakh, around 800,000 in Russian, while around 50,000 in other languages (ASRK, 2014). It is very hard to acquire textbooks published in Uighur and Uzbek languages because they are not printed in large quantities and are less often reprinted.

Based on critical discourse analysis, this study analyzes texts and illustrations of 15 Kazakh and Russian language early

literacy textbooks published in Soviet and independent Kazakhstan, all approved by the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan. This sample is representative because school textbooks are published every four years with minimum changes to the content. The textbooks and early literacy textbooks included in this study were printed by main publishing houses such as Mektep, Rauan, Atamura and Almatykitap. Thus, the sample included the most recently published textbooks, including those published in 2014.

Alippe (ABC book in the Kazakh language), *bukvari* (ABC book in the Russian language) and other early literacy textbooks, such as *ana tili 1* (Kazakh language textbook) and *Dunie tanu/Poznanie mira* (A word around us textbooks in both languages) are used to teach the alphabet and basic reading and writing skills to young citizens of Kazakhstan. Along with learning to read and write, children are expected to carefully memorize particular “Kazakh” conceptualizations of childhood, heroes, and homeland. In these early literacy textbooks, language is used to vividly describe the homeland to young citizens of Kazakhstan, while pictures are used as a visual representation and reinforcement of this “imagined” homeland to impressionable children. Indeed, physical pictures in particular textbooks make those visualizations very specific. This is why critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) is used here to examine how school curriculum contributes to the construction of national identity through the pictorial and textual content of early literacy textbooks in Kazakhstan. Texts are not mere words,

but powerful linguistic constructions that transmit created narratives. Competing discourses create and re-create educational practices in relation to power in broader social and political context that they are part of (Laclau, 1980). It is through school curriculum and in the case analyzed early literacy textbooks that children are introduced to the notions of nation, homeland, society, and citizenship. Educational experiences are a vital part of children's broader socialization process and are interdependent with power relations embedded in society. That is why identifying and studying education discourses in school textbooks is so important. Highly qualitative methods of critical discourse analysis allow mapping central narratives in early literacy textbooks in relation to presence of cultural themes.

Literature on the political aspects of national identity formation in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods has been well documented. However, little is known about the role of education in creating or re-creating national identities. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of education in national identity formation during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in Kazakhstan. In order to better understand the role of education in post-Soviet identity- and nation-building processes, it is important to consider the following main themes: (1) socially constructed nature of national identities and (2) the role of textbooks and school curricula (especially early literacy textbooks) in the social construction of nationhood.

Socially Constructed Nature of National Identities

In this paper I will explain that national identity in Kazakhstan is being built through education around a single Kazakh ethnicity and that this could potentially lead to social problems, as Kazakhstani society is highly diverse. Thus, I argue that national identity should not be defined or focused solely on one ethnicity, but rather be built on a supranational level. Simply put, when people live in a territory bounded by geographical and political borders, that territory should be perceived as a nation. While these borders are typically socially and politically constructed, I believe that accepting Kazakhstani as a national identity construction is necessary for the purposes of inter-ethnic peace in Kazakhstan.

When constructing political identities, the state authority "imagines" and "creates" a nation because it is not physically possible to meet every person who lives in the country and, consequently, claim that you belong to it (Anderson, 2006). Thus, nations are created metaphorically, or they are "imagined." Those in power create a perception of what the nation is and legitimize their vision.

National identity construction based on one ethnicity in the context of post-Soviet Kazakhstan is interesting, since the official rhetoric highlights the importance of multiethnic society of Kazakhstan in developing patriotism. In his speech on new Kazakhstan patriotism, President Nazarbayev (2014) reiterated the importance of learning Russian, English, and Kazakh languages and developing an inclusive identity:

“Universal Kazakhstan identity must become the cornerstone in the minds of our people”:

“We are all Kazakhstan citizens, having equal rights and equal opportunities. The new Kazakhstan patriotism is something that should unite all of society without any ethnic differences.”

“We are a multiethnic society; there should be no double standards when it comes to interethnic relations. All citizens should be equal in the eyes of the State. No one should be discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity or other features.”

One of the major strategies in constructing national identity is to develop the image of national characteristics and then to spread those ideologies through education (Apple, 2013). History and civic education are traditionally used for these ideological experiments because history can be re-written in favor of the current politicians in power. In the Soviet era, education supported the main communist ideology and Marxist-Leninist dogmas (Kissane, 2005). Friendship between people of various ethnicities was depicted as a desired state of inter-ethnic relations during the Soviet period.

However, many scholars have argued that ethnicizing curriculum – that is, enforcing the dominance of one cultural identity over the others – has become a common trend in education in the post-Soviet space (Beresniova, 2011; Janmaat, 2007; Ismailova, 2004; Michaels & Stevick, 2009; Silova, 1996). This could be a reflection of a broader political agenda, as

is the case in Ukraine. There, “Ukrainophiles” or nationalists (re)build history capitalizing on the importance of Ukrainian culture. They spread their interpretation of history in schools the armed forces (Kuzio, 2006). Meanwhile, in Latvia, textbooks published after the collapse of the Soviet Union were full of Latvian folksongs, Latvian tales and Latvian culture and history (Silova, 1996).

Why multiculturalism matters

There are different ways for states to interact with their citizens around the world. In developed liberal democracies, multicultural policies advance more successfully, whereas in the post-Soviet space highly centralized political regimes attempt to create nation states based around one titular ethnicity. In Europe, multiculturalism is interpreted in different ways and serves various purposes in creating respective nation states. Kymlicka states that multicultural ideas have not replaced the nation-building process in the West; rather they have simply changed it. Furthermore, Kymlicka (2001) argues that citizenship and multicultural education plays a different role in multination and nation states with no large “territorially concentrated language groups” (p. 312). In multination states, national identity construction based on one language can be seen mostly as undermining stability rather than promoting unity. On the other hand, in countries where immigrant population voluntarily came to their new homeland, helping them to integrate by teaching the mainstream language is more useful.

There are scholars who criticize Kymlicka’s liberal multicultural views. Kuzio (2006) argues that multiculturalism

cannot be applied to the post-Soviet space. He further states that scholars and politicians in the West question the validity of multicultural ideology, especially after 9/11. However, his arguments are incomplete – as if respecting diversity is to blame for the terrorist attacks. On the other hand, as evinced by Bhikhu Parekh², one of the most prominent scholars on multiculturalism in Great Britain and Muslim population, multiculturalist policies are extremely important in order to integrate minorities, provide symbolic representation and further strengthen inclusion and the feelings of belonging. It is when minorities feel excluded, marginalized and abandoned, that they join alternative social groups.

In line with Parekh's thinking on the importance of multicultural inclusion, an interesting trend is taking place in Kazakhstan. Recently, a group of ethnic Korean leaders from South Korea shipped books of Korean fairytales translated into Russian language in order to teach Russian-speaking ethnic Koreans about Korean culture. Their next project will be printing early literacy textbooks teaching Korean language and Korean culture to Russian-speaking ethnic Koreans of Kazakhstan.³ This signifies that the mainstream school curriculum does not provide sufficient information on cultural minorities of Kazakhstan. In the light of

² See recent speech on multiculturalism by Bhikhu Parekh given at the London School of Economics at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCCI VtEydQg>

³ See more at <http://koresaram.kz/творчество-корейцев-казахстана/publicistika/schaste-o-kotorom-mozhno-ne-znat/>

the above-mentioned facts, it is hard to undermine the importance of Kymlicka's view on the role of multiculturalism and minority rights. He believes that not only should all humans be treated equally and be able to realize political, cultural and social rights in the countries they are living in, but also that the rights of minority representatives and multicultural ideals should be proactively defended.

In countries experiencing democratic transition, like Kazakhstan, Kymlicka (2007) still sees potential for the development of liberal multicultural ideas and believes that this development will be especially useful in the long term: “to my mind, this is potentially an attractive model for linking short-term stability concerns with long-term goals of justice” (p.305). Indeed, social justice is at stake when we talk about nation-building processes, since a dominant narrative of the nation can exclude ethnic or gender minorities.

Nation-building processes in the broader post-Soviet space and Kazakhstan hardly incorporate Kymlicka's views. This is rather paradoxical, as Kazakhstan is a member of the United Nations and other international organizations which promote and insist on the respect for equal rights and cultural diversity. While Kazakhstan is projecting an image of a multicultural friendly nation, *de facto* ethnonationalist policies and rhetoric are flourishing. Ethnic Kazakhs or those who speak fluent Kazakh are favored even during the selection processes for the prestigious Bolashak scholarship program to study abroad.

In Kazakhstan, social exclusion of ethnic minorities occurs despite the fact that they have lived in Kazakhstan since its independence (Peyrouse, 2007).

Ethnonational preference occurs on the grounds of a primordialist envisioning of the nation, in which ethnic Kazakhs and its culture and language are considered to be most important. However, political exclusion also happens to urban ethnic Kazakhs who do not speak Kazakh language (Brubaker, 2011). Kazakhstan is inviting minority groups to assimilate and marginalizes any alternative imagining of the nation state rather than one based on Kazakh culture.

Kazakhification processes through Textbooks and School Curriculum

Education is deeply ingrained in the cultural and political life of the society it serves. Educational curriculum is one of the main channels through which particular representations of imagined “national” values are created. “Official knowledge” is created in and through the process of education (Apple, 1993). School textbooks are used as the communication channel between the state and the citizens in the formation of a particular discourse. Apple argues that curriculum is not a “neutral knowledge,” because it reflects complex interplays between power and politics (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). School curriculum contains carefully crafted information developed by the state agencies.

While multiple players may be involved in educational policy formation, textbook development in Kazakhstan is still largely under the domain of the state. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, curriculum has been changed many times by the Ministry of Education in an attempt to reflect the “true” history of an independent country. This is similar to

other post-Soviet states where history classes usually become de facto spaces for ideological narratives. For example, Anderson (2007) reveals that historians in Moldova emphasize the ethnic component of the nation: “the Moldovan historians, who write the history textbooks, are not concerned with loyalty to the state but rather with loyalty to the nation – that is, an ethnic Romanian nation” (p. 280). While the issue of the writing of history textbooks is highly contested in Moldova, ethnic sentiments in developing school curricula are still present in the discourse on general history textbook creation.

Kissane (2005) notes that the process of building a modern “Kazakh” state encompasses the process of ‘Kazakhification’ through education. For example, the issue of Russia’s “colonialism” versus a voluntary annexation of Kazakhstan to the Russian Empire was ordered to be reevaluated in history textbooks. While previously it was taught that the annexation of Kazakhstan by Russia was voluntary, after 1991 the Kazakh Academy of Sciences asked to reevaluate the content of general curricula and, in particular, history textbooks (Kissane, 2005).

The Kazakhification in education is becoming bold and widespread. According to the most recent speech by the Minister of Education made in August 2015, Aslan Sarinzhapov,⁴ three subjects will be taught strictly in Kazakh language regardless of the language of instruction

⁴ See the original speech by Sarinzhapov at <http://tengrinews.kz/tv/novosti/obschestvo/4798/>

of the school. They are History of Kazakhstan, Kazakh Literature and Geography. This change signifies the intentions of the government to construct certain imaginings of the nation, as history classes and textbooks are often used to spread such ideologies (Kissane, 2005).

In addition to history and civic education curriculum in secondary education, “Kazakhification” takes place at elementary and primary education levels, where children begin to conceptualize the state and the nation. It is at the earliest age that ideas such as childhood, homeland, national heroes, and role models are created in children’s minds. Mead (2012) underlines the importance of studying *bukvari* because early literacy textbooks introduce the idea of “the nation” to “young and impressionable pupils” (p. 5). Mead and Silova (2013) describe the topic of childhood in the context of nation, state, and culture by critically analyzing the development of primary textbooks in post-socialist Latvia and Ukraine. This article was of particular interest for the current study, as Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Latvia share a common post-Soviet legacy. The authors

stated that post- socialist ideologies did not disappear in modern states, but rather “... the flows, fissures, and translations in these textbooks reveal tension, ambivalence and hybridity” (Mead & Silova, 2013. p.196).

By analyzing “pedagogies of space” in early literacy textbooks of Armenia, Latvia and Ukraine, Silova, Mead, and Palandjian (in press) touch upon the issue of the association of geographical territory and its link to national identity formation. They conclude that “educational narratives about (national) ‘homeland’ – instilling geography, location, and landscape with symbolic (national) meanings – have enduring, critical importance for identity-scapes of peoples in the former Soviet Union” (Silova & Mead & Palandjian, in press, p.18). Another study by Filippova (2009) traces ideological replacement from Soviet to Ukrainian cultural depictions in the content of *bukvari*. All of these studies analyzed national identity formation in several post-Soviet countries. However, as far as it is known, similar studies have not yet been conducted on the topic of early literacy textbooks in Kazakhstan.

Findings

An analysis of texts and illustrations reveals that Kazakhstan’s early literacy textbooks, as everywhere in the world, are full of implicit and explicit messages. Through seemingly innocent texts and pictures children are invited to imagine their idealized lifestyles, activities that they will enjoy doing, or outfits that they might like to wear. To various degrees, such ideological messages are present in

all textbooks analyzed, linking particular activities, behaviors, and even appearances to Kazakh culture. By portraying Kazakh traditional costumes, for example, an identity is created that is “Kazakhified.” The nation depicted in textbooks is that of a community based on shared (Kazakh) ancestry. Of course, multiple identities are depicted, be it gender, professional, or other roles. The

purpose of this current work is not to simplify the complexity of the topic of identity construction; rather, the aim is to describe how one particular version of identity construction dominates the discourse about what it means to be “Kazakh” or “Kazakhstani” in the post-Soviet context.

Typically, Russian-language *bukvari* appear to reflect more diversity compared to Kazakh language early literacy

Image 1: Nenets culture



(Pavlenko & Abenova, 2001, p.141)

Despite the presence of cultural diversity, Russian-language *bukvari* contain clear elements of Kazakhification. In the picture below, a girl of Russian ethnicity is shown sitting on a camel decorated with traditional Kazakh ornaments. The camel is in the background of mountains and red tulips, a common steppe flower in Kazakhstan. Below, there is a picture of a yurt. It is a combination that constructs a picture of childhood: a steppe, mountains,

Image 3: A girl on a camel

textbooks. This is especially visible in the inclusion of different national fairytales. For example, Russian language *bukvari* contain a Nenets fairytale about a cuckoo bird, a Russian tale about a snow girl, a Serbian story about a moon, and a Kazakh story about Aldar-Kose, a famous fictional character (Pavlenko & Abenova, 2001). These fairytales are always accompanied by colorful illustrations featuring children in their particular national costumes.

Image 2: Russian house - teremok



(Pavlenko & Abenova, 2001, p.62)

camel or a horse, and traditional elements such as a yurt. The accompanying text reinforces the impressions gleaned from the image. The text describes how a girl named Julia loves her camel and rides in a steppe full of tulips. She feeds a camel with what is locally known as a sort of apricot, *uryuk*. The locality of the picture and its setting reinforce the image of a national identity that is directly linked to Kazakhstan.



(Pavlenko & Abenova, 2001, p.99)

As textbook analysis reveals, Soviet style “internationalism” in early literacy textbooks is mostly replaced with a great emphasis on the importance of “titular” Kazakh ethnicity and its imagined role as a “unifying” culture in a multiethnic state (for more on Kazakh culture as a unifying

factor see Jones, 2010). In rare cases, when the international discourse on the “friendship of all people” remains, children wearing Kazakh national costumes occupy the central space, while the rest of the children appear on the picture’s periphery.

Image 4: Centrality of Kazakh culture in *bukvar*



(Pavlenko, 2009, p.49)

In another example of a Kazakh language textbook, diversity is represented in *anattili 1* in relation to a specific holiday of national unity – May 1. Such presentation of multiculturalism - only in the context of specific holiday – is rather superficial,

since it is not reflected across school curriculum, especially in early childhood textbooks. Ethnic, gender, and age diverse members of the society are not portrayed in equal power positions in pictures and texts.

Image 4: May 1 celebrations



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Tazhimbetova, 2012, p.174)

Ethnic representation in textbooks is different in Russian and Kazakh language textbooks, yet is similar in that Kazakh culture is represented in all the early literacy textbooks analyzed. On the one hand, children depicted in *bukvari* generally have light skin and they look more like ethnic Russians due to representation of Russian traditional costumes and homes, *izbushkas*. Russian language *bukvari* contain varying images of childhood. For example, in one picture, a Russian environment is depicted with girls wearing Russian costumes playing in a meadow surrounded by birch trees, which is often associated with Russian natural landscapes. In the background, children are dancing in *khorovod*, a Slavic art dance. On the following page, however, a vivid portrayal of Kazakh culture is visualized in a full-sized page picture of people wearing Kazakh costumes and playing a Kazakh traditional instrument, *dombra*. On the other hand, in *alippe* (Kazakh language

early literacy textbooks), children appear to be more Asian-looking. Interestingly, Kazakh language early literacy textbooks rarely include images of children of other ethnicities, with the ethnically Kazakh children dominating the textbook space. As seen in the analysis above, Kazakh or Kazakhstani childhoods appear as two competing narratives in Russian language *bukvari*. Yet, elements of Kazakhification become more explicit and dominant in the Kazakh language *alippe*, which convey very concrete monoethnic and monocultural depictions of childhood.

The power positions among various visually ethnically diverse people portrayed in pictures and texts are noteworthy. For example, one picture in *alippe* shows a Slavonic-looking man in front of tractor, which reflects his professional position of someone working in agriculture. While there are many pictures of Kazakh-looking people at

various jobs, this image portrays a man of Asian appearance wearing a business suit, while two other workmen – perhaps a Russian and of Kazakh ethnicities – are receiving flowers from children. It might signify an interesting power dynamics – a person (Kazakh) from the city comes and attends a ceremony of appraising workers (possibly Russian) in the village. This positioning appears to reverse the typical Soviet power dynamics where ethnically the Russian population often came from the cities and ethnically Kazakh populations were associated with the rural living.⁵

Image 5: Power positions among diverse population



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p.51)

⁵ For some, it might seem that all men look Kazakh. Please note that on the picture below a man on the right wears a Kazakh traditional hat, while a Slavonic looking man wears a regular hat without ethnocultural symbols. Taking into account that it was the only picture of a person with a lighter skin color in the textbook analyzed printed in Kazakh language, the impression it created was that the person is of a different ethnicity rather than the dominant one portrayed visually and textually throughout the early literacy textbook.

Symbols: Kazakh Traditions, Costumes, Yurts, and Horses

Rural lifestyles, spaces, landscapes, nature, and sociocultural environment dominate the content of textbooks published both in Russian and Kazakh

languages. Such a combination of national symbols creates an omnipresence of Kazakh culture in all spheres of life: daily living, clothes, home decorations or leisure. For example, the picture below shows a conglomeration of the above-mentioned symbols.

Image 6: Kazakh family in front of a yurt



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p.29)

Many girls, especially in *alippe*, wear dresses with symbolic Kazakh decorations, while boys wear jackets and pants decorated with Kazakh ornaments.

Often they perform an activity that relates to playing a national musical instrument or Kazakh traditional games such as *asyk*.

Image 7: Children wearing Kazakh costumes and playing *dombyra*



(Pavlenko & Abenova, 2001, p.88)

Image 8: Boys in Kazakh costumes playing *asyk*



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p.68)

Rural depictions of mountains and steppes are often accompanied by the portrayal of Kazakh traditional homes, yurts, as the ideal way of living. Yurts, which are Kazakh traditional homes made of wool, are no longer in functional use in regular, modern-day life in Kazakhstan. They mostly fulfill roles of historical

memories. During celebrations of Kazakh holidays, such as *Nauryz*, symbolic New Year celebrations, public spaces might be decorated with yurts. However, textbooks continue to depict yurts as an everyday, typical dwelling of Kazakhs. For examples, one text describes a yurt in the following way:

Image 9: A yurt



(Pavlenko, 2009, p.80)

A yurt.
 White yurt stands in the steppe. Everyone
 loves it. Sun rises in the morning:
 -Hello, yurt!
 A wind came!
 -Good day, yurt!
 Tulips opening:
 -Hello to you, yurt!

The yurt almost transforms into a living creature of its own in the poem and the picture accompanying the text. The steppe with beautiful tulips is imagined as a natural setting for everyday living. Representation of Kazakh traditions ranges from singing competitions to horse racing with one unifying factor: rural

setting as a cultural space. An important element of recognizing traditional Kazakh costumes is the presence of special ornaments. In Kazakh culture, various ornaments symbolize relation to flowers or animals. The text below describes the Kazakh style decorative element – *oyu*.

Oyu.

“My grandmother is decorating a small traditional blanket made of camel wool with ornaments. Ornaments look very beautiful.”

Image 10: Oyu



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p. 97)

Traditional decorative elements do not only decorate clothes but every single page of *ana tili 1*. Flipping through the textbook gives students the feeling of touching “history” as a concrete visualization, in that it encourages readers to think that it is not a school textbook, but a historical fairytale manuscript that transports readers to the past epochs of nomads and *batyrs*. In the imagined past, Kazakh culture is portrayed as monoethnic and central, as well. Interestingly, the omnipresence of

Kazakh traditional costumes is particularly vivid in *alippe*. Usually, families are portrayed at a gathering or sharing a meal sitting in an old-style manner. Such an approach to culture and a nation tied to its historical “genetic code”, in this case Kazakh, resembles the ethnonationalist imaginings of the nation in prior nation-states (Smith, 1986). Shown in the image below are a kettle and teacups, and a hat and carpets with traditional ornaments:

Image 11: Kazakh traditional family dinner



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p.28)

Boys, girls, elderly and even animals are depicted wearing Kazakh style jackets, jewelry and accessories. Pictures below demonstrate visualizations of a fox and a

frog, wearing ethnic costumes. The ornaments are seen on the images of the frog's belt and on the fox's traditional Kazakh *kamzol*:

Image 12: A fox in a Kazakh costume Image 13: A frog in a Kazakh outfit



(Auelbaev & Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Kulazhanova, 2012, p.129-130)

While foxes and frogs might be randomly chosen as players of the stories, camels and especially horses have a central role in Kazakh culture. Historically, Kazakhs made carpets and clothes from camel and sheep wool, since those resources were at hand. In Image 18 above, a lady was shown making a carpet out of camel wool (see Image 18). Horses were an intrinsic part of nomadic lifestyle in terms of

transportation and food. According to Kazakh myth, Kazakhs were the first to domesticate wild horses. For an inexperienced viewer, the depiction of horses in early literacy textbooks might seem commonplace in a children's book. However, analyzed in context, horses are directly linked to the Kazakh culture. The text below is about the Kazakh tradition of putting a boy on the horse:

An “Interesting tradition”

“The Kazakh nation has an interesting tradition – seating a boy on a horse.

A horse and riding accessories are presented as a gift to a boy of five-six years old. The celebrations peak when a grandfather gives blessings to a grandson. Grandmother throws *shashu* – candies around the boy. Later on boys participate in horse racing – *bayga*. The elderly organize a big celebration – *toi*. This tradition is a national custom, transmitted from generation to generation.”

Image 14: Interesting tradition - putting a boy on a horse



(Aimagambetova & Idilova, 2012, p.81)

Through a historical lens, a horse was not only a source of transportation and food for Kazakhs, but also a basis of pride and the showcase of wealth. The best racing horses were very expensive to own and horse racing was a fun activity to be involved in and observe. *Bayga* is a traditional Kazakh game of racing horses. The picture below from a *bukvar* shows

two boys riding horses in a race, wearing colorful hats in what appears to be traditional Kazakh costumes. The accompanying text invites us to imagine that children should play Kazakh traditional games, preferably wearing traditional costumes. The role of the “horse” becomes central as it symbolizes beauty and strength:

Image 15: *Bayga*



(Pavlenko, 2009, p.75)

While symbolizing national Kazakh culture, such a strong focus on horses is surprising as not many Kazakh (or Kazakhstani) children receive horses as

gifts. It is very expensive to maintain a horse in an urban setting, while it might be more common for rural children. Moreover, many children in cities do not

have the opportunity to ride horses or camels as described above. Textbooks are generally dominated by the rural landscapes as seen in the examples above with only a marginal presence of urban scenery.

On Homeland and Heroes

Homeland is a very strong narrative that is present in all early literacy textbooks analyzed. It creates a very strong sense of what it means to be a Kazakhstani. It is a centerpiece in creating a national identity because it develops a sense of belonging. Almost all textbooks start with the presidential address: “I believe that you will love your homeland and will grow up as a decent citizen of your homeland” (Pavlenko & Abenova, 2012, p.3).

In some texts the sense of “belonging” is interpreted in very narrow ways by stating that the land of Kazakhstan belongs to Kazakhs. A poem about the land of Kazakhs describes how various regions of Kazakhstan belong and are loved by all Kazakhs. It says that it will be forever the motherland of Kazakhs without the reference to Kazakhstanis:

The Land of Kazakhs.

Atyrau,
And Altai, And Arka,
And Semirechye
Are loveable lands of all Kazakhs,
Our Motherland forever.
(Otetyuleulyly, 2012, p.31)

Not surprisingly, a picture of a Kazakh-looking boy sitting on a horse accompanies this poem. The page is decorated with images of yurts and traditional ornaments. This short poem is printed in three languages and the

Russian language translation does not leave room for interpretation, because it clearly states: “all Kazakhs like this land” and not “Kazakhstanis” (Otetyuleulyly, 2012, p. 30). It shows how the exclusivity of language translates into the exclusion of other ethnicities from the homeland that belongs exclusively to “Kazakhs.” Another translation from Kazakh of the poem about homeland shows the value placed on history and geography in building the national identity. The imperative tone of the message shows that young people should or must love the homeland:

“Homeland.

Your parents, your friends and your
brother mean homeland.
Your country, your capital city,
Your region and your village represent
the homeland.
History is homeland. Strong nation means
homeland.
Homeland is a song, homeland is a poem.
Achievements of our nation bring pride to
our nation.
My friends mean homeland.
Young people, love and value your
homeland!”
B. Iskakov
(Auelbaev, 2012, p.114)

Creating role models to children has an explicit ideological meaning. The majority of early literacy textbooks begin with a depiction of President N.A. Nazarbayev. He is usually portrayed wearing a non-Kazakh traditional costume and having a sort of technological device in front of him; thus, creating an image of a “modern” man, wearing regular business attire. However, deconstructing the text accompanying the image, one will see a Kazakhified

message, since the address starts by calling children *aynalayin*, a tender word for “dear” or “surrounded by blessings” in the Kazakh language. This expression exists only in the Kazakh language and is very representative of Kazakh culture. Later the text talks about all people in Kazakhstan with a particular Kazakhified version of the citizenship. A role model is envisioned with combined identity of a modern looking man but cherishing Kazakh culture as the central one:

“Aynalayin!

You hold a wonderful book “Bukvar”,
which will open new knowledge
horizons.

I congratulate you with entering this
fascinating world of knowledge!
The education you receive will be your
personal wealth and will benefit all
people in
Kazakhstan.

I believe you will love your homeland
and will grow up a good citizen of our
Homeland.”

President of the Republic of Kazakhstan,
N. Nazarbayev

(Pavlenko & Abenova, 2012, p.3)

The following ethnic Kazakh heroes of the World War II Momyshuly, A. Moldagulova and M. Mаметова, are present in several early literacy textbooks. Similarly, ethnic Kazakh

Image 17: A hero



cosmonauts, T. Aubakirov and T. Musabaev, are presented as role models in early literacy textbooks, although references to the Soviet cosmonaut Y. Gagarin still persist in some texts:

“What is a cosmodrome? A cosmodrome is a place where rockets, satellites and big space shuttles with cosmonauts depart from.

The first cosmic satellite of the Earth took off from Baykonur cosmodrome.

The first cosmonaut Y. Gagarin took off from there too.”

(Aimagambetova, 2012, p.127)

Other ethnic Kazakh artists, painters, singers, writers and thinkers are presented as role models in early literacy textbooks, including Y. Altynsarin, S. Ualihanov, Abai Kunanbailuly, A. Baitursynuly, Al-Farabi, Tole bi, Kazybek bi, Ayteke bi, Mahambet, Abylay khan, Z. Zhabaev, K. Bayseitova, S. Zhienkulova, K. Satpaev, and Kasteev. To my best ability, I could not identify a description of role models belonging to other ethnicities. Such a particular portrayal of national heroes suggests that the whole nation of Kazakhstan is heroic. It is visualized with a picture of a male warrior, wearing Kazakh costume standing near the horse. The accompanying text says:

Hero.

“Kazakh nation is a heroic nation.

Kabanbay, Bogenbay, Nauryzbay batyrs were Kazakhs.

Gauhar, Aliya and Manshuk were female heroes. Boys and girls who are heroes get a special name: Nation’s Hero. People respect their own heroes.” (Auelbaev &

Nauryzbaeva & Izguttynova & Tazhimbetova, 2012, p.100)

In fact, this attachment to the past is present across most themes (costumes, yurts, horses) and is refers mostly to Kazakh culture. Imagined and re-imagined history obtains a physical life through texts and imaginings of early literacy textbooks.

Conclusion

The analysis of the early literacy textbooks published in post-Soviet Kazakhstan clearly reveals that national identity is constructed in a Kazakh-centric way; and, while civic identity is occasionally portrayed, Kazakhified identity dominates the majority of textbooks. The analysis of identity construction in early literacy textbooks was relevant because children start their education and socialization process at a very early stage. In this context, school curriculum should reflect diversity that is surrounding children in their lives both inside and outside of school. The majority of post-Soviet textbooks published in Kazakhstan partly fail to represent the diversity of ethnic composition in Kazakhstani society.

It is important to discuss the differences between Russian and Kazakh-language early literacy textbooks because the content of the Russian language textbooks is more representative of Kazakhstan's ethnic diversity, presented in fairytales of various ethnicities such as

Russian, Nenets, and Serbian stories. Some pictures in early literacy books portrayed children wearing Russian traditional costumes but many wore regular casual clothes such as jeans and t-shirts. The same presence of neutral clothing was present in Kazakh language early literacy textbooks as well. However, *alippes* were dominated by the representation of ethnically Kazakh culture in both texts and images.

Kazakh culture is romanticized and omnipresent in the majority of the early literacy textbooks analyzed. Staging the Kazakh culture as the central one in Kazakhstan can have severe negative consequences to social cohesion and stability in a multiethnic society because the Kazakh language and traditions are not native to the majority of minority representatives. In a way, the centrality of Kazakh culture serves a banal role in building a Kazakhified nation, what might be related to Billig's 'banal nationalism' (1995). It is through mundane and everyday practices of picturing the symbolic images of the titular ethnicity and culture that the nationalist ideas are spread. The reimagining of homeland in terms of ethnonationalist vision of "the land of Kazakhs" excludes representatives of minority cultures from belonging to the country they call their home.

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