

Cultural Identity Preservation Through Culinary Traditions Among Uzbeks in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This paper examines how members of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan preserve their cultural identity through their culinary traditions, a set of food-related practices and social norms. By focusing on cultural meanings associated with traditional foodways, as well as the transmission of its recipes across generations, it investigates how food can play a significant role in the preservation of cultural identity. The research questions are as follows: How do members of the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan preserve their cultural identity through culinary traditions? What factors connected to traditional foodways influence cultural identity maintenance?

The study utilizes the framework of foodways suggested by Bennett et al. (1942), which implies a strong connection between food and culture. It also draws upon Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to understand how traditional food practices can act as a symbolic marker of in-group belonging among the members of the Uzbek ethnic group. To achieve the objectives of this research, online qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 young (21-26 years old) and elderly (65-70 years old) male and female members of the Uzbek ethnic group who have managed to preserve their language, traditions, and customs despite living in the territory of the current Kazakhstan for more than five centuries.

The interview guide consists of 8 sections and 40 questions. Each section is devoted to a specific element of Uzbek culinary traditions: ethnic identity, daily food practices, celebratory food, transmission of culinary traditions, commensality, gender roles, gastropolitics, and cultural identity. To recruit research participants, snowball and purposive sampling were employed. The collected data were analysed using qualitative coding and thematic analysis. Since most studies on food, culture, and society in Central Asia focus on traditional dishes, overlooking many other components of culinary traditions, this paper contributes to the existing literature by approaching traditional foodways as a social process rather than merely national meals.

It shows that several components of Uzbek culinary traditions, such as commensality, the gendered division of food labour, the elderly's responsibility in the transmission of culinary traditions, and role distribution among neighbours before celebrations, are vital for cultural identity preservation. This study also emphasizes that culinary traditions contribute to community building and strengthening community ties, sustaining cultural identity without the need to define strong group boundaries between Uzbeks and Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. The broader implication of this research is that it can assist in shaping more nuanced policies aimed at celebrating cultural diversity.

Keywords: Uzbek culinary traditions, Uzbek traditional foodways, cultural identity, cultural preservation, Social Identity Theory, Structuration Theory.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Food is more than just sustenance. It tells stories, holds memories, and brings people together. It is deeply connected with culture, identity, and community. This is especially true for ethnic minorities who have been living outside their ancestral homelands for a long period, such as Uzbeks in Kazakhstan. These people have maintained their cultural identity despite living in the territory of the current South Kazakhstan for more than 5 centuries. Moreover, they upheld distinct subsistence practices; Uzbeks were settled agriculturalists, while Kazakhs were pastoral nomads (Nesipbayeva, 2012).

The Kazakh-Uzbek conflicts contributed to the formation of the Uzbek diaspora in the current territory of South Kazakhstan in the 15th-16th centuries, whereas the colonisation of Central Asia by the Russian Empire led to the expansion of the diaspora in the 19th century. Regardless of the longstanding threat of assimilation into the local community, Uzbeks in Kazakhstan managed to preserve their language, traditions, and customs (Nesipbayeva, 2012).

According to the 2021 population census, more than 600 000 Uzbeks live in Kazakhstan. Most of the Uzbek population is concentrated in Shymkent (46.6%). In the village of Karabulak and Sairam District, located in southern Kazakhstan, the majority of residents are Uzbeks. These settlements have many schools and kindergartens where Uzbek is the language of instruction.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This capstone project explores how members of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan preserve their cultural identity through their culinary traditions, a set of food-related practices and social norms (e.g. gendered division of food labour, commensality). By focusing on cultural meanings associated with traditional foodways, as well as the transmission of its recipes across generations, I will investigate how food can play a significant role in the preservation of cultural identity, which is defined as a sense of belonging to a specific culture (Cambridge University, n.d.). The research questions are as follows: How do members of the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan preserve their cultural identity through culinary traditions? What factors connected to traditional foodways influence cultural identity maintenance and strengthening?

1.3. Significance and Contribution

Several research papers, scholarly articles, and scientific books discuss the vital role food plays in socioanthropological and cultural studies. However, since they often focus on the culinary traditions of ethnic groups from the Global West, there is a gap in academic knowledge about the relationship between foodways and the preservation of cultural identity among ethnic communities from Central Asia and Kazakhstan, in particular. The importance of my capstone project lies in its potential to address this gap. In addition, it goes beyond traditional dishes to explore social processes surrounding food.

This study is especially relevant for Kazakhstan, as the state regularly initiates programs to celebrate cultural differences between the representatives of numerous ethnicities living in the country. The results of this capstone project can contribute to the development of innovative solutions for the issues related to cultural preservation and identity expression, both in Kazakhstan and around the globe, by enhancing the understanding of the connection between traditional food-related practices and the abovementioned concerns.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Uzbek Cultural Identity and Uzbek Culinary Traditions in Kazakhstan*

A few research papers examining the role of minority culinary traditions in cultural identity preservation within the Central Asian context have recently been published in the *Food and Identity in Central Asia* journal by the Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia. In this publication, Sanders (2017) explores the production, preparation, and consumption of food within the wider context of ethnicity and identity based on the observations she made and conversations she had during her fieldwork among Germans in Taldykorgan, Kazakhstan. The author introduces the term “international table” to discuss how Kazakhstani residents tend to cook and eat meals from different national cuisines (e.g. Kazakh bread, Russian sausages, and Korean salads) simultaneously. Thus, she concludes that although food is often ethnically classified, there is only a slight association between one’s ethnicity and the traditional meals they consume. Put differently, people in Kazakhstan do not limit themselves to preparing and eating meals associated with their ethnic group. In addition, the author mentions that national dishes can be adjusted by providing the example of the “German beshbarmak”, which has pork in it. This observation creates a basis for examining how traditional Uzbek food, which is the central focus of this capstone project, may have been influenced by Kazakh culinary traditions. Although Sanders (2017) does not write about the Uzbek ethnic group specifically, her work contextualises the preservation of identity through culinary traditions among Kazakhstani Uzbeks within the broader academic discussion of the importance of ethnically framed meals in cultural continuity among minority groups in Central Asia.

Alibayeva (2017) also investigates the interconnectedness of traditional foodways and ethnic identification, as well as differentiation, but her research sample consists of Kazakhs and Uzbeks, which makes her paper more relevant to the topic of this capstone project. In this paper, the author provides a comparative analysis of societal interpretations of food among Kazakhs and Uzbeks based on her observations made during 15 feast events and follow-up interviews with their participants in South Kazakhstan. She draws upon several studies that conceptualise “Uzbekness” to understand this phenomenon in the Kazakhstani context. Subsequently, the researcher discusses different markers of ethnic identity that differentiate Uzbeks from Kazakhs, such as language and genealogy, but primarily focuses on culinary traditions. After attending Uzbek and Kazakh wedding celebrations and interviewing one of the feast participants, a Kazakh woman, Alibayeva (2017) concludes that Kazakhs tend to consider a smaller amount of meat

(relative to Kazakh cuisine) offered at wedding tables and serving chickpea soup (Table 1) to guests as a part of Uzbek cultural identity. While this source presents insights into celebratory meals and practices among the Uzbek ethnic group in South Kazakhstan, it does not give much information about the Uzbek culinary traditions upheld in daily life, as well as the historical formation of the Uzbek diaspora in the abovementioned region.

The article by Nesipbayeva (2012) complements the previous paper since it examines the emergence and development of the Uzbek ethnic group in South Kazakhstan. The author states that the differences in the culture of Uzbeks and Kazakhs are primarily associated with their historically distinct subsistence practices. Uzbeks were settled agriculturalists, while Kazakhs were pastoral nomads. This demonstrates a strong connection between traditional foodways and cultural identity. To be specific, Uzbek agricultural practices gave rise to culinary traditions that emphasize grains, vegetables, and spices, whereas livestock farming employed by Kazakhs resulted in a focus on meat and dairy products. This ultimately led to associations between grains and spices and Uzbek culture, as well as meat and milk and Kazakh culture. Although Nesipbayeva (2012) does not elaborate precisely on cultural identity preservation among the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan, her analysis offers valuable insights into how historical patterns may have affected the maintenance of unique culinary traditions within the Uzbek community. In general, the limited number of research papers on the topic of this capstone project can be attributed to the scarcity of socioanthropological studies on food in Central Asia.

2.2. Foodways in Uzbekistan, Minority Culinary Traditions, and Cultural Preservation

Socioanthropological and cultural studies on food in other countries often include topics such as ethnic identity, gender roles, gastropolitics, commensality, and heritage preservation. Relevant academic papers from Uzbekistan, in particular, facilitate the understanding of Uzbek culinary traditions and their role in identity formation and preservation. Zanca (2007) presents a description and analysis of his findings from a meal ethnography conducted in rural and urban areas of Uzbekistan. He claims that the consumption of fatty foods as a part of Uzbek culinary traditions symbolises hospitality and national identity. Moreover, he sees traditional cuisine as a cultural basis from which ethnic identity emerges. The author also highlights that food preparation and consumption in Uzbekistan are highly sex-segregated, as females cook and males are served first. This comparative perspective based on gender lays the foundation for the exploration of gender roles and expectations in preserving cultural identity through culinary traditions and transmitting the recipes across generations among Uzbeks in Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that this source focuses on the traditional foodways of Uzbeks in Uzbekistan rather than Kazakhstan, it provides vast amounts of information about the original Uzbek cuisine and culinary practices, which can be regarded as the basis for food-related traditions of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan.

Likewise, Turaeva (2017) offers essential insights into the culinary traditions of Uzbeks in Uzbekistan as well as the symbolic meanings attached to different national meals. Notably, she analyses the contribution of national foods such as bread, Plov, and Sumalak to the identification

process and group belonging among Uzbeks from different regions of Uzbekistan. She highlights that Uzbek food can vary significantly across different regions of Uzbekistan, which is also linked to regional identity. To illustrate this, the preparation of bread and the decorations used on it differ from region to region, and Yupka is a signature bread of Khorezm residents. Another example can be found in the variation in ingredients used to cook Plov. Khorezmian Plov might seem peculiar to Uzbeks from other regions of Uzbekistan, as less oil is involved in the preparation process, and onions are not fried. The author also states that the residents of each region tend to express pride associated with the distinct characteristics of their local cuisine and differentiate themselves from other Uzbeks based on these variations. This suggests that Uzbek culinary traditions in Kazakhstan may differ from those in Uzbekistan, implying that the same logic can be applied to the cultural identity of Uzbeks. In other words, Uzbeks in Kazakhstan may distance themselves from Uzbeks in Uzbekistan in terms of identity despite sharing common genealogical ancestry. Overall, the source highlights the importance of taking into account regional differences when studying foodways and identity.

Moving on to the studies on ethnic minorities' traditional foodways and their cultural identity outside Central Asia, by conducting a thematic analysis of interview data obtained from 15 study participants with significant age differences, Baydeniz (2025) investigates how culinary traditions are preserved and modified among Cretans in Turkey due to their importance in cultural continuity. He explores traditional meals, beverages, kitchen tools and utensils, cooking vessels, and different cooking techniques, as well as modern adaptations of culinary traditions, their transmission across generations, and their role in religious celebrations. These are the main themes that are also examined in this capstone project. Additionally, the research findings by Baydeniz (2025) support claims made earlier by Sanders (2017) about the adjustments that are likely to be made to national dishes under the influence of another culture or ethnic group. For instance, some Cretan traditional cooking methods changed due to the limited availability of necessary equipment or ingredients. Generally, the source demonstrates how the connections between gastronomic heritage preservation and cultural identity are understood globally.

While Baydeniz (2025) focuses on the preservation of culinary traditions among an ethnic group in Turkey, Reddy and Van Dam (2020) turn to a multicultural setting. The authors use data collected from 18 focus group interviews with Indian, Chinese, and Malay females in Singapore to study how culinary traditions contribute to cultural and ethnic identity construction and preservation. They employ Self-Categorisation and Social Identity Theory to understand people's attitudes towards maintaining their traditional food practices in the sociopolitical context of a multicultural state that promotes diversity. Self-Categorisation Theory explains how individuals prioritize their group identity over their individual identity, and Social Identity Theory states that social groups provide their members with a sense of identity tied to their place in society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to the authors, the study participants engaged in traditional food preparation and consumption primarily on special occasions rather than on a daily basis since they did not think that their identities were threatened. Kazakhstan is also a multicultural country that

embraces its diversity. The state regularly initiates various programs dedicated to celebrating cultural differences between the representatives of numerous ethnicities living in it. This suggests that members of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan may follow their culinary traditions mainly during celebrations, but not on a daily basis. Nevertheless, traditional food-related practices still play an important role in cultural identity preservation, since the authors conclude that these are often used to convey one's identity to others. Moreover, this paper explicitly ties food and identity to Social Identity Theory, providing an insightful perspective for the exploration of cultural identity preservation through culinary traditions among the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan. Such an outlook has not yet been employed in studies on a topic similar to that of this capstone project.

Extending the discourse on culinary traditions observed during celebrations, Tuomainen (2014) explores commensality within the cultural and social context of the Ghanaian diaspora in London. The author argues that eating together is essential for strengthening community ties among the members of the ethnic group as well as transmitting cultural identity. To illustrate this, she relies on her observations from the ethnographic fieldwork she carried out in 18 Ghanaian households. It was found that community commensality, which refers to sharing food during gatherings on special occasions (e.g. birthdays, weddings, funerals), was key to maintaining strong community ties for Ghanaians in London to the extent that event hosts invite people beyond their family members and relatives. The research findings connect to broader academic discussions on the importance of sharing meals during social events and cultural celebrations in the collective preservation of cultural identity. Despite being limited in the number of topics it investigates, when coupled with the Social Identity Theory, this study provides a strong foundation for the analysis of traditional food practices that are seen as a marker of social belonging to the Uzbek ethnic group by members of the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This research project will focus on cultural identity preservation and culinary traditions as central concepts and explore their relationship through the framework of foodways and Social Identity Theory. The term “foodways” was presented by Bennett et al. (1942) and defined as the system of cultural and social activities concerning food, such as procurement, preparation, serving, sharing, consumption, as well as food rules, gastropolitics, gender roles, commensality, and transmission of recipes across generations. Essentially, it highlights that the preparation and consumption of meals are primarily shaped by one's sociocultural environment, which refers to numerous factors such as shared values, traditions, and social behaviours.

Building on this concept, Brellas and Martinez (2024) argue that food is tightly related to all aspects of culture. They describe different modes of subsistence, including pastoralism and agriculture, and explain how they affect the community's social structure, identity, and culture. This connects to the argument made earlier by Nesipbayeva (2012) about the association between culture and subsistence practices, as she writes that Uzbeks relied on agriculture, while Kazakhs adopted pastoralism to fulfil their basic need for food. The concept of foodways allows

for a holistic discussion of culinary traditions among the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan. Besides, it provides a basis for treating food as a social process rather than simply as traditional dishes.

Social Identity Theory, introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), is another central theoretical framework employed in this capstone project. According to the authors, social groups give their members a sense of identity associated with their place in society as well as produce distinct norms, reinforcing intergroup boundaries. As a result, individuals tend to identify with particular groups based on their nationality, ethnicity, etc., and regulate their behaviour to comply with the norms and expectations set by those groups. Social Identity Theory is crucial for understanding how communities consolidate their in-group identity through various symbolic means in response to the threat of assimilation (Harwood, 2020). This suggests that culinary traditions can serve as a marker of in-group belonging among the members of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan.

Additionally, examining the preservation of cultural identity through the lens of Social Identity Theory represents another significant academic contribution of this research. Existing studies on the role of minority culinary traditions in cultural continuity within Central Asian countries have not explored this topic from this perspective. Social Identity Theory creates space for examining how Uzbeks manage to differentiate themselves from Kazakhs in terms of cultural and ethnic identity through their traditional food-related practices, given that there are many similarities between Uzbek and Kazakh culinary traditions. This proposes that Uzbeks may frequently emphasize the unique characteristics of Uzbek cuisine, reinforcing group boundaries to preserve their cultural identity. Overall, combining foodways with Social Identity Theory benefits this capstone project, since these demonstrate how Uzbek culinary traditions that involve social norms (e.g. community commensality or gender expectations associated with passing the culinary traditions down from generation to generation) perpetuate the sense of identity and belonging among the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan.

Structuration Theory, proposed by Giddens (1984), is another important framework that contributes to this research. It emphasizes the duality of social structures, arguing that these structures are reproduced by the same individuals they influence. Through concepts, such as recursive practices and time-space distancing, this theory sheds light on the interplay between individual actions and social systems. Recursive practices refer to the idea that social activities are recreated by individuals through repeated performance, whereas time-space distancing highlights how social systems develop from simple interpersonal interactions to broader networks. In the context of traditional foodways, Structuration Theory can explain how culinary traditions are transmitted across generations through the repetition of certain recipes or food-related rituals, which ultimately spread beyond families and become vital aspects of cultural identity passed down to next generations.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Collection

To achieve the main objectives of this research project, a qualitative research design was employed. The research population consists of young and elderly members of the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan. The research sample comprises 10 Uzbek males and females aged 20-25 and 60-70 from Shymkent. The choice of the city was determined by the high concentration of the Uzbek population. This makes the sample more representative and increases the probability of finding participants who meet the sampling criteria, the regular practice (at least every other month) of Uzbek culinary traditions.

Snowball and purposive sampling was employed during recruitment as I contacted my Uzbek acquaintances and kindly asked them to introduce me to their Uzbek relatives, friends, and neighbours who might be interested in participating in this research. Then, I contacted the potential participants via WhatsApp. To ensure that they met the selection criteria, I asked them a couple of questions about their ethnic background and daily food practices. Then, I invited them to participate in the research.

Since most of the Uzbek population of Shymkent is concentrated in the village of Karabulak and the Sairam district, all my participants are from either of these settlements. However, younger interviewees have been living away from their hometowns for more than 5 years due to enrollment in undergraduate or graduate studies. Two of them are studying abroad, while the other two are studying in Almaty and Astana, the largest cities in Kazakhstan. Elderly research participants are living in their hometowns.

The data collection period began in mid-December 2025 and ended in mid-February 2026. Semi-structured online qualitative interviews were conducted to collect detailed information about practices, traditions, and cultural meanings related to Uzbek culinary traditions. The participants joined the audio/video call via WhatsApp on an agreed date and time from a location of their choice to ensure convenience and confidentiality. Each interview was conducted individually to ensure anonymity.

At the beginning, participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing an explanation, and the strict confidentiality of any information obtained during the interview. They were also asked for permission to audio-record their responses. All participants provided oral informed consent. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. The participants were asked to reflect on their daily food practices, dishes they prepare and consume during special occasions, and the symbolic meaning they attach to their traditional food.

The age difference between the interviewees assists me in understanding the transformations that have taken place in relation to the preservation of cultural identity through traditional foodways across generations. Gender diversity allows for the exploration of gender expectations associated with gastronomic heritage conservation. This qualitative approach

contributes to the project objectives by deepening my understanding of Uzbek culinary traditions and their role in maintaining cultural identity, as I get an insider perspective.

Nonetheless, this data collection method has several limitations. First of all, some elderly participants experienced difficulties contacting me via WhatsApp. They also did not fully understand some interview questions due to their limited knowledge of Kazakh/Russian. To accommodate their needs, I called them via phone and paraphrased the questions using simpler vocabulary. Additionally, it was extremely difficult to find elderly participants with sufficient Kazakh/Russian language proficiency. This highlights the importance of knowing the native language of research participants to ensure mutual understanding.

3.2. Interview Guide

According to Roberts (2020), properly constructed interview questions help scholars gain in-depth knowledge of the research topic. In this research, the interview guide consists of 8 sections and 40 questions. Each section is devoted to a specific element of the culinary traditions: ethnic identity, daily food practices, celebratory food, transmission of culinary traditions, commensality, gender roles, gastropolitics, and cultural identity. Such an organisation ensures that the larger topic of cultural identity preservation through culinary traditions is studied holistically by breaking it down into smaller constituent parts. 15 questions require short, survey-style answers, whereas the other 25 questions need extensive answers. Some questions were skipped if the participant had already addressed them in earlier responses.

The first six questions helped me double-check that the participants met the sampling criteria, such as being Uzbek, aged 20-25 or 60-70 and following Uzbek food practices regularly. Questions 8-10 helped me explore the cultural meanings the participants attach to traditional Uzbek food. This connects to the concept of foodways that highlights the impact of culture on food-related practices. Questions 11-13 were tied to the concept of cultural continuity, as they examined how culinary traditions were passed down from generation to generation. Questions 14-16 showed the role of the community in maintaining cultural identity through traditional foodways. Questions 17-25 contributed to the understanding of the gendered division of food production labour as a vital part of culinary traditions.

Questions 26-31 focused on the perceived differences between Kazakh and Uzbek cuisine, Uzbek food-related practices in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the transformation of Uzbek culinary traditions under the influence of geography or local communities, the uniqueness of Uzbek traditional foodways compared to Kazakh ones, and other elements of gastropolitics. Social Identity Theory was employed to analyse the answers to these questions, as they revealed information about reinforcement of group boundaries and culinary traditions as a marker of in-group belonging. Questions 32-38 indirectly invited the participants to reflect on their cultural identity and the importance of traditional food-related practices in cultural identity preservation. This helped me understand whether culinary traditions were seen by the very people who practice them as playing a role in cultural continuity. The last questions ensured that I had covered all the important aspects of the research topic.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative methods, such as coding and thematic analysis. Qualitative coding is “the analytical process of organising raw data into themes that assist in interpreting the data” (Baralt, 2011, p. 222). Thematic analysis, in turn, is described as “the process of identifying patterns within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). It helps highlight themes that frequently arise during interviews (Green & Thorogood, 2005) and creates a basis for distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information acquired, demonstrating how to make sense of a large dataset. Combining qualitative coding and thematic analysis allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the cultural identity preservation through culinary traditions among the Uzbek ethnic group in Kazakhstan.

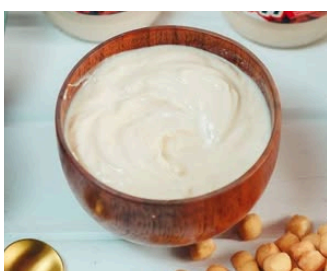
Firstly, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were coded to identify relevant parts of the responses and categorise them into themes. Unanticipated themes were also taken into account. The process was conducted using MS Excel only. Then, the codes were grouped into broader categories, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify and analyse patterns. The transcripts were read multiple times to ensure that all themes were included in the analysis. The responses were interpreted to situate the analysis into a broader academic discussion about the relationship between minority culinary traditions and cultural identity. The findings were connected to concepts like foodways and Social Identity Theory. Quotes from the responses were used in the presentation of the research findings. Pseudonyms were used instead of the real names of the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

4. Commensality and Cultural Identity

Communal commensality, which refers to sharing food during gatherings on special occasions, plays a critical role in cultural preservation by building tight relationships between the members of the Uzbek diaspora. It is often at the center of the practice and transmission of Uzbek culinary traditions. Data from ten interviews suggest that Uzbeks often come together with their relatives, friends, and neighbors to celebrate different events (e.g. birthdays, Nowruz, Eid). During such celebrations, they usually serve Uzbek traditional dishes (Table 1). Moreover, many culinary traditions are practiced and transmitted on such events. These are, for example, having a tea party before a meal, preparing Sumalak for Nowruz, or not eating until the most respected guest starts their meal. In other words, through commensality, culinary traditions are learned by younger generations: “We prepare celebratory meals on special occasions because we grew up seeing how our grandmothers and grandfathers did so” (elderly female 1).

Table 1. Uzbek traditional dishes described by research participants

#	Description	Main ingredients	Prominence in the meal	Photograph
1	Plov, rice	Rice, lamb or beef, carrots, onions, spices	Plov is a main traditional dish. Some Uzbek families cook it every Thursday. It is also a popular celebratory dish.	
2	Dimlama, stew with meat and vegetables	Lamb or beef, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, onions, spices	Dimlama is mainly a celebratory food, but it can occasionally be cooked on an ordinary day.	
3	Samsa, crispy pastry filled with meat and onions	Dough, lamb or beef, onions, spices	Samsa is a popular snack. It is prepared both for ordinary days and celebrations.	
4	Sumalak, sweet paste	Sprouted wheat, flour, water	Sumalak is a celebratory food prepared for Nowruz.	
5	Hanum, steamed dumplings	Dough, meat, potatoes, onions, spices	Hanum is an everyday food.	

6	Halim, slow-cooked chickpea soup	Chickpeas, beef or lamb, water	Halim is prepared for celebrations. It is not an everyday food, since it takes more than 24 hours to cook. It is not popular among Uzbeks in Kazakhstan.	
7	Norin, shredded noodles with meat	Shredded noodles, beef, onions, broth	Norin is mainly a celebratory food, but it can occasionally be cooked on an ordinary day.	
8	Bugirsok, airy fried dough balls	Flour, water, sugar, salt, oil	Bugirsok is a celebratory food. In contrast to Kazakh boursaks, it is sweet.	
9	Kurt toua, sour milk product	Sour milk, salt	Kurt toua is a drink typically prepared for celebrations.	
10	Qovurdoq, stir-fry meat with potatoes	Lamb or beef, potatoes, onions, spices	Qovurdoq can be prepared both for ordinary days and celebrations.	
11	Gulchatay, broth of meat, vegetables, and dough sheets	Meat broth, meat, carrots, onions, potatoes, thin dough sheets, spices	Gulchatay is an everyday food.	

12	Chuchvara, fried dumplings	Dough, beef or lamb, onions, spices	Chuchvara is a popular snack. It is prepared both for ordinary days and celebrations.	
13	Lagman, noodles with meat and vegetables	Noodles, beef or lamb, potatoes, bell peppers, onions, garlic, spices	Lagman is an everyday food.	
14	Manty, steamed dumplings	Dough, lamb or beef, onions, spices	Manty can be prepared both for ordinary days and celebrations. It is typically prepared for family gatherings.	
15	Mastava, soup with rice and meat	Rice, lamb or beef, carrots, onions, potatoes, spices	Mastava is an everyday food.	

For the participants, culinary traditions and their transmission were vital for cultural preservation, as they helped pass down history and values, as well as unite community members. Some responses focused on the importance of traditional foodways in conveying the rich history of Uzbeks: “Through our food-related traditions, we can help next generations remember their history and origins” (young male 1). Other responses highlighted the cultural values embedded in Uzbek culinary traditions: “By passing down our knowledge of our culinary traditions, we will pass down love. We will also pass down genuine interest in our own culture” (elderly female 1). Many mentioned that Uzbek traditional dishes bring the community together: “Plov is food that has to be shared with others. Everyone eats it from one big plate” (young female 1).

It was also found that Uzbeks in Kazakhstan take pride in their culinary traditions: “When we prepare Sumalak, everyone gets together. We talk and have fun. I have never seen anything like this in any other culture” (young male 1). One of the respondents even claimed that it is essential to teach not only the next generation of Uzbeks, but also other people to cook Uzbek dishes: “I do my best to teach my Kazakh friends recipes of my traditional food” (elderly

female 4). Additionally, from the interviews, it became clear that Uzbek dishes retain deep emotional significance for the participants: “Whenever I eat together with my siblings, we recall our childhood memories, when our mother prepared delicious food for us and we ate it together” (elderly female 4); “For me, Uzbek food feels like home” (young female 1).

In line with Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984), the transmission of Uzbek culinary traditions takes place through a recursive process that involves repetition of food-related practices during shared meals, which ultimately reinforces cultural identity, as Uzbeks internalize values, emotions, and history carried by culinary traditions. By observing and learning the culinary traditions Uzbeks contribute to the continuous reproduction of social norms, ensuring their preservation across time and space. Thereby, food-related practices performed within families and communities that were primarily based on face-to-face interactions turn into impersonal social systems surrounding Uzbek cultural identity.

Additionally, these findings suggest that regular participation in communal commensality (at least every other month) throughout life is likely to result not only in good knowledge of Uzbek traditional food practices, but also of the Uzbek history and cultural values that stand behind them, which essentially strengthens cultural identity. This is evident from the fact that younger respondents who moved out from their hometowns to bigger cities or abroad, where they interact with their fellow Uzbeks less frequently and practice a smaller number of culinary traditions compared to older Uzbeks who live in an Uzbek neighborhood, were more likely to relate themselves to Kazakhs contrary to the older interviewees.

The young male respondents said: “Sometimes my friends say that I act like I am Kazakh” (young male 2); “Yes, I am Uzbek, but still, my nationality is Kazakh” (young male 1). They mentioned that they live in a shared apartment, work, and are friends with Kazakhs. One of them added that, in comparison to when they used to live at their parents’ house, nowadays they cook and eat Uzbek traditional dishes much more rarely: “When I was a child, I used to practice more of the culinary traditions, because I lived in my parents’ house” (young male 1). Overall, the emphasis made by these men on their Kazakh identity could signal a minor detachment from their Uzbek cultural identity.

These findings align with the conclusions made by Tuomainen (2014) after exploring commensality within the cultural and social context of the Ghanaian diaspora in London. It was discovered that communal commensality was key to maintaining strong community ties and transmitting cultural identity for Ghanaians in London to the extent that event hosts invite people beyond their family members and relatives. In her paper, Tuomainen (2014) highlights the importance of sharing meals during social events and cultural celebrations in the collective maintenance of cultural identity. Thus, frequent interactions with fellow Uzbeks, which typically take place through commensality, might be crucial for cultural identity preservation among Uzbeks in Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, an alternative explanation of this trend could be an age factor. Traditions might gain greater importance as an individual grows older. This is clearly evident from the fact that despite rarely practicing Uzbek culinary traditions currently, all younger

participants claimed that in the future, they will teach their children how to cook Uzbek dishes: “I would like to learn how to cook Uzbek food deliciously and teach my kids when I have them” (young female 2). Moreover, it was found that such a desire does not depend on gender. Both younger male interviewees agreed that they will definitely teach their sons to cook Uzbek meals, in particular, Plov. Then, they added that their future daughters will be taught by their mothers.

One of the male respondents supported his opinion by saying that he himself learned cooking from his father: “Back then, I often helped my father prepare Plov. That is how I learned cooking” (young male 2). Since other responses revealed that on special occasions, main dishes are cooked by men, this finding demonstrates that one of the key elements of Uzbek culinary traditions, which is the gendered division of food labor, is passed down to the next generation, as fathers teach their sons how to cook Plov. To sum up, as they age, younger participants may become preservers of culinary traditions regardless of their current frequency of practice of Uzbek foodways.

5. Maintaining Community Identity through Culinary Traditions

Besides communal commensality, Uzbek traditional food practices include actions that reinforce cultural identity both at the family level and within the broader community. The gendered division of food labour, the elderly’s responsibility in the transmission of culinary traditions, and the role distribution among the neighbors before events, all contribute to community-building within a diaspora. In other words, dividing responsibilities based on gender and age, coupled with neighbors working together to prepare for shared celebrations such as Nowruz, strengthens community ties. This is because they comprise a social system where everyone has a role. Each role reinforces belonging to the Uzbek community.

At the family level, the interviewees reported that on a daily basis, women are responsible for cooking, but on special occasions, men cook main meals whereas women make side dishes: “Men cook Plov and cut meat. Women prepare everything else, like soups and so on” (young female 2). One respondent added: “For events, we usually hire a professional cook, who is always male” (elderly male 1). In addition, elderly members of the Uzbek community in Kazakhstan, particularly females, carry the responsibility of culinary traditions transmission. More than half of the respondents stated that they had learnt cooking Uzbek traditional dishes from their mothers, mother-in-laws, and grandmothers. For instance, one participant stated: “I learned cooking Plov from my mother-in-law” (elderly female 3). Another interviewee described: “When my Mom cooked, she used to make me sit next to her. Sometimes she would give me a piece of dough so I could practice my skills” (elderly female 1).

Interestingly, despite the gendered division of food labor and the custom of Uzbek women teaching their daughters to cook, younger female respondents stated that they currently do not prepare Uzbek traditional dishes. Both live abroad in university dormitories. One eats in canteens and has never cooked Plov in her entire life, while the other cooks “healthy European meals” for herself. On the contrary, younger male interviewees reported that they cook almost every other week. One of them lives in an apartment with his Uzbek friends, and they take turns

cooking. Every Thursday, they cook Plov. The other young male respondent occasionally cooks Uzbek food for his Kazakh friends. Hence, it follows that young Uzbek men tend to cook, and in particular cook Uzbek dishes, more frequently than young Uzbek women. This could be another signal of a slight detachment of these participants from their Uzbek cultural identity, as cooking is typically considered women's job among Uzbeks in Kazakhstan.

Within the broader community, roles can be distributed among the neighborhood residents. One respondent said: "Before Nowruz, responsibilities are divided between the neighbors. One family grows wheat, the main ingredient of Sumalak, another one prepares lunch, and so on" (young male 1). Another participant explained that the event is coordinated by a female host: "The host, a woman, gathers all the neighbors (40-50 people), collects monetary contributions, and assigns roles to each family in the neighborhood" (elderly female 1). This reflects an idea proposed by Bennett et al. (1942), where they state that the preparation and consumption of meals are primarily shaped by cultural factors such as shared values, traditions, and social behaviours. Social Identity Theory, introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), is also at play here since every member of the Uzbek community has their own role and responsibility. They know their place in the society, follow its distinct norms, which ultimately leads to reinforcement of group identity or social identity.

As Zanca (2007) states, traditional cuisine serves as an important cultural factor in the formation of ethnic identity. Uzbek culinary traditions perpetuate the sense of belonging among the Uzbek diaspora in Kazakhstan through actions that consolidate in-group identity, as each member regulates their behaviour to comply with the norms set by their society: Uzbek men cook celebratory meals, elderly Uzbeks teach younger ones, and families collaborate to prepare for events. In-group identity refers to an identity based on group membership, or the sense of belonging to a particular community, which goes along with the value and emotional importance of that sense of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Ultimately, this helps Uzbeks maintain their cultural identity and pass it down to younger generations.

6. Kazakhs as an Out-group: Differences between Uzbek and Kazakh Culinary Traditions

Apart from Uzbek culinary traditions and their role in cultural identity preservation, this research also explored perceived differences between Uzbek and Kazakh food-related practices. A few respondents highlighted that Kazakh traditional dishes have more meat compared to Uzbek traditional dishes: "When I visit my Kazakh friends, I notice that they put a lot of meat in their food. It is difficult to see dough sheets of beshbarmak under huge pieces of meat" (elderly female 1). This supports a conclusion made by Alibayeva (2017), who states that a smaller amount of meat (relative to Kazakh dishes) in food is considered part of Uzbek cultural identity. The interviewees also added that Uzbek cuisine has more spices: "Uzbeks use a lot of spices compared to Kazakhs" (young male 2).

Several research participants expanded on this question by explaining that Kazakhs used to be pastoral nomads, while Uzbeks practiced agriculture: "Historically, Uzbeks employed agriculture, and Kazakhs were livestock farmers" (elderly male 1). One of them continued that

nomadism required far more energy than a settled lifestyle; hence, Kazakhs consumed large portions of meat. At the same time, agriculturalists were able to use more vegetables and spices in their meals since they cultivated a wide range of crops. This perfectly aligns with an idea proposed by Nesipbayeva (2012) about the impact of historically distinct subsistence practices on Uzbek and Kazakh culinary traditions.

It was further found that Uzbeks in Kazakhstan employ different adaptation strategies to continue cooking Uzbek traditional meals, which retain so much cultural significance for them (Table 2), given the limited availability of some main ingredients, such as specific kinds of rice or unusual spices. Some Uzbeks simply adjust the recipe: “Occasionally, it is difficult to find yellow carrots for Plov. In such cases, we just use regular red carrots” (young male 1). Others go to Uzbekistan to buy either ingredients or ready-made meals: “I often visit Tashkent to eat Halim. Then, I take 10 portions of it back to Shymkent. I store them in a freezer” (elderly male 2). Sometimes they may travel to Uzbekistan not necessarily because the ingredients are unavailable in Kazakhstan but because they are less affordable: “My parents visit Uzbekistan to buy nuts and dried fruits. They are much cheaper there than here” (young female 2).

Table 2. The cultural meanings of Uzbek traditional food

#	Name	Cultural meaning
1	Plov	Symbolizes abundance and hospitality. “As far as I know, Plov was invented during the time of Amir Timur [a conqueror who ruled over Central Asia], when there was a need for a dish that could be prepared quickly, with a relatively small variety of ingredients, and in large quantities in order to feed the whole army” (young female 2). “Imam al-Bukhari was a very well-known scholar from Central Asia, born in Bukhara [modern-day Uzbekistan]. At some point in his life, he moved to Sham [modern-day Syria], and he took the ingredients of Plov with him. He cooked Plov there, and everyone loved it. This may be why traditional Middle Eastern dishes also involve similar ingredients. He may have been the one who brought the recipe to the Middle East” (young male 2). “When I see people eating Plov abroad, I feel very proud of my culture. I like that many people around the world know and love Plov” (elderly male 1).
2	Halim	Requires meticulous work, since it takes more than 24 hours to cook, including the preparation of grains.
3	Sumalak	Full of vitamins, requires meticulous work, takes 10-24 hours to prepare. “A poor single mother wanted to give her hungry children the sense that they had food to prepare. She took a small amount of wheat and put it in a large pot with lots of water. She boiled it for 12 hours. Suddenly, the mixture turned into Sumalak, a delicious dessert” (young male 1).

Nonetheless, despite these key perceived differences discussed by a few interviewees, most research participants did not particularly define group boundaries between themselves and the titular nation, Kazakhs. They focused more on the similarities between Uzbek and Kazakh traditional dishes rather than on the differences. For example, one respondent jokingly claimed: “Food of both Uzbeks and Kazakhs consists of dough and meat presented in various forms” (elderly female 2). Another participant stated: “We live together. Of course, our food is similar to each other” (elderly male 1). Someone even said that they did not see the difference in the taste of the meat in the Kazakh and Uzbek traditional dishes: “For me, Beshbarmak’s meat and Plov’s meat taste the same” (young male 2).

These results challenge Social Identity Theory because they contradict the assumption that to maintain and preserve their cultural identity, minorities tend to define strong group boundaries between themselves and the titular nation. According to the theory, Uzbeks would be expected to see Kazakhs as an out-group, and that would manifest in them emphasising the differences between Uzbek and Kazakh traditional dishes rather than the similarities or the unique characteristics of Uzbek cuisine. However, the responses did not follow such a pattern. This can be explained using research by Reddy and Van Dam (2020). The authors examine how culinary traditions contribute to cultural continuity in a multicultural setting. Interviews with Indian, Chinese, and Malay females in Singapore revealed that in a multicultural state that promotes diversity, minorities are less likely to strictly adhere to their culinary traditions. They may do so mainly on special occasions. The researchers connect this to the fact that respondents do not think that their cultural identities are being threatened.

This may also apply to the Uzbek diaspora in Shymkent, particularly in the village of Karabulak and the Sairam District, where the majority of residents are Uzbeks. They may not feel the need to define Kazakhs as an out-group because they live in areas with a predominantly Uzbek population, meaning that the influence of Kazakh culinary traditions there is limited. Moreover, Kazakhstan is a country that embraces the diversity of numerous cultures living in it. Thus, Uzbeks may not feel that their identities are threatened by the titular nation. This suggests that cultural identity preservation, particularly when it is performed through the practice of culinary traditions, does not always require strong group boundaries between ethnic groups.

In addition, this research explored how Uzbeks in Kazakhstan treat Uzbeks in Uzbekistan in terms of cultural identity and culinary traditions. A study conducted by Turaeva (2017) sheds light on the tendency of residents of each region in Uzbekistan to differentiate themselves from each other based on regional variations in culinary traditions. This highlights the importance of consideration for regional differences in food and identity studies. Thereby, it was found that Uzbeks in Kazakhstan may distance themselves from Uzbeks in Uzbekistan in terms of identity based on culinary traditions, despite sharing common genealogical ancestry. The interviewees reported that food-related practices of Kazakhstani Uzbeks have changed due to Kazakh influence: “Since we live with Kazakhs, we are more generous in terms of food compared to Uzbeks in Uzbekistan. They are more frugal” (elderly female 1).

In this respect, it is important to understand what Uzbeks in Kazakhstan consider as their cultural identity primarily. This research looked into the meaning of being Uzbek for the participants in the same manner as studies reviewed by Alibayeva (2017) examined the notion of “Uzbekness”. The interviews revealed that Uzbek cultural identity is built on three main pillars: religious identity, appreciation of traditions, and certain foundational personality traits. Many respondents emphasised the connection between their ethnicity and the religion of Islam: “To be Uzbek is to adhere to your religion” (young male 1); “Since I belong to the Khodja tribe, my ancestors descend from the Prophet’s lineage” (young male 2). One interviewee shared that she makes a prayer before starting to cook: “Before I cook, I always ask Allah to help me, make everything easier for me, and give strength to my hands” (elderly female 4).

Furthermore, the participants claimed that to be Uzbek is to know and value Uzbek traditions: “Being Uzbek means rich history and deep-rooted traditions” (young female 1); “To be Uzbek is to know your language, history, and traditions” (young female 2). This included culinary traditions as well: “Since I am Uzbek, I need to know how to cook at least Plov” (elderly male 1); “To be Uzbek is to be able to cook Uzbek traditional dishes” (young male 1). Besides, Uzbek cultural identity was associated with personality traits, such as honesty, communal orientation, and diligence: “To be Uzbek is to be honest” (elderly female 1); “Uzbeks think not only about themselves, but also about their families, relatives, and neighbors” (young female 1); “Uzbeks are hard workers. Even when we cook, we put our hearts into the process” (young male 2). Overall, Muslim identity, appreciation of traditions, and the abovementioned foundational personality traits constitute the cultural identity of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan.

7. Conclusion

In summary, most studies on food, culture, and society in Central Asia focus on traditional dishes while overlooking many other components of culinary traditions. This capstone project contributes to the existing literature by approaching traditional foodways as a social process rather than merely national dishes. It shows that several components of Uzbek culinary traditions, such as commensality, gendered division of food labour, and responsibility distribution among neighbours, play critical roles in cultural identity formation, maintenance, and preservation. This study also emphasizes that culinary traditions contribute to community-building and strengthen community ties, sustaining community identity without a need to define group boundaries between Uzbeks and Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. Therefore, they are vital for sustaining peaceful coexistence among the various ethnicities living in one country.

Additionally, it was found that culinary traditions have deep cultural and emotional significance for Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, which ultimately contributes to cultural preservation. It was revealed that reduced participation in communal commensality, where these traditions are usually practiced and reproduced, leads to a minor detachment from Uzbek cultural identity. On a related note, the research results have shown that Uzbeks in Kazakhstan differentiate themselves from Uzbeks in Uzbekistan in terms of culinary traditions and cultural identity. Instead, the backbone of their cultural identity consists of religious affiliation, appreciation for

traditions, and fundamental personality traits, such as honesty, communal orientation, and diligence. Moreover, each of these tends to find expression in food-related practices.

Since all research participants in this study are from Shymkent and live in Uzbek neighborhoods, future research should examine the relationship between culinary traditions and cultural identity among Uzbeks from other cities and regions. This would assist in exploring the experiences of Uzbeks living in Kazakh or multi-ethnic neighborhoods. In addition, the research methodology could be strengthened by participant observation. A longitudinal study could also greatly contribute to research results, as it would shed light on the gradual development of greater appreciation for culinary traditions manifested through their frequent practice as an individual grows older. It would help definitively answer the question of whether the younger generation becomes the preservers of traditions as they age.

The broader implication of this research is that it can assist in shaping more nuanced policies aimed at celebrating cultural diversity. Nowadays, this is done through cultural programs that primarily emphasize the importance of language and customs rather than food-related practices. However, governments should consider culinary traditions not as peripheral but as central to cultural identity preservation. Policymakers in Kazakhstan should initiate cultural identity preservation strategies based on the practice and transmission of culinary traditions. This would help the government, scholars, and the general public acknowledge the vital role of traditional foodways in cultural continuity and the maintenance of harmony among the various ethnicities in one country.

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Appendices

Interview Guide

Personal Background

1. What is your name? What is your ethnicity? How old are you?
2. Are you a migrant or were you born in Kazakhstan?
3. Do you know anything about how your ancestors came to Kazakhstan?

Daily Food Practices

4. What kinds of food do you usually cook and eat at home during the week?
5. Do these include traditional Uzbek food? Which ones?
6. How many times a month do you cook and eat Uzbek traditional food?
7. Where do you usually get your ingredients from? (e.g. market, grocery store, neighbours, garden, farm)

Special Occasions and Celebratory Food

8. What kinds of food do you make for a celebration or holiday? (e.g. weddings, Nowruz, or religious events). Do these include traditional Uzbek food? Which ones?
9. What makes those dishes special? Why are they made for a celebration?
10. Are there any rituals, customs, or rules related to food that are followed during these celebrations? What are they?

Transmission of Culinary Traditions

11. How did you learn to cook traditional Uzbek food?
12. Do you teach anyone else to cook traditional Uzbek food?
13. If not, do you plan to do it in the future? Why/why not?

Commensality and Group Identity

14. Are there any holidays or events that you celebrate with your distant family members, friends or neighbours who are also Uzbek?
15. What kinds of food are usually served during those celebrations?
16. Can you tell me about the last time your family and your neighbours got together to eat and celebrate something special?

Gender Roles

17. Who usually decides what to cook in your family?
18. Who usually cooks in your family?
19. Who is served first in your family?
20. Who usually decides what to cook during celebrations?
21. Who usually cooks during celebrations?
22. Who is served first during celebrations?
23. Are there any dishes associated with men and women in Uzbek culture?
24. Are there dishes that men usually cook?
25. What do you think when you see men cooking or helping in the kitchen?

Gastropolitics

26. Are there any ingredients necessary for making traditional Uzbek foods that are absent or hard to find in Kazakhstan?
27. Do you get them from somewhere else? Or do you use something else instead?
28. How do you think Uzbek and Kazakh cuisines are similar or different?
29. Have you ever been to Uzbekistan? Have you tried any dishes there?
30. Do you think Uzbek food in Kazakhstan tastes the same as in Uzbekistan?
31. Do you think traditional Uzbek food practices in Kazakhstan are similar to traditional Uzbek food practices in Uzbekistan? Or are they different from each other?

Cultural Identity and Belonging

32. What does being Uzbek mean to you?
33. What does Uzbek cuisine mean to you?
34. How do you feel when you eat or cook traditional Uzbek food?
35. Do you feel there is something special or different about Uzbek cuisine compared to others? What is it?
36. Do you think food helps people remember who they are in terms of ethnicity or cultural identity? Why/why not?
37. Are there any foods that make you feel proud or connected to your ancestors?
38. In your opinion, how important is it to teach the next generation about traditional Uzbek food practices? Why?

Final Remarks

39. Is there anything important you want to tell me that I haven't asked?
40. Is there anything else you would like to add?
41. Do you have any questions for me before we end this interview?

Data Analysis Table

Themes	Codes
Commensality and Cultural Identity	Shared meals
	Culinary traditions practiced on special occasions
	Uzbek traditional dishes
	Symbolic meanings behind culinary traditions
	Transmission of culinary traditions on special occasions
	Reduced participation in communal commensality
	Emphasis on mixed/Kazakh identity

	Rare practice of culinary traditions
	Generational perceptions of the importance of culinary traditions
Maintaining Community Identity through Culinary Traditions	Gendered division of food labor
	Elderly's responsibility in the transmission of culinary traditions
	Role distribution among the neighbors before events
	Generational perceptions of the gendered division of food labor
Kazakhs as an Out-group: Differences between Uzbek and Kazakh Culinary Traditions	Differences between Uzbek and Kazakh culinary traditions
	Similarities between Uzbek and Kazakh culinary traditions
	Uzbek and Kazakh historic subsistence practices
	Limited availability of ingredients and adaptation strategies
	Cultural significance behind Uzbek traditional dishes
	Uzbeks in Kazakhstan and Uzbeks in Uzbekistan
	Uzbek cultural identity