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THE ROLE OF AHMET YESEVI'S TEACHINGS IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AMONG KAZAKH YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Ahmet Yesevi structured his doctrine around four principles (Sharia, Tariqa, Marifa, and Haqiqa) collectively known as the "Four Gates." In his framework, these stages constitute a spiritual seeker's progressive search for meaning. This study examines the influence of Yesevi's teachings on the construction of national identity among Kazakh university students in Türkiye. Adopting a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with Kazakh students enrolled in Turkish universities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, guided by criteria such as attachment to cultural identity, engagement with spiritual values, and familiarity with Yesevi's thought. The central research question addresses how the "Four Gates" doctrine shapes these students' perceptions of identity. The findings indicate that participants perceive Ahmet Yesevi not merely as a historical figure but as a cultural and spiritual guide. His Sufi-oriented approach (emphasizing unity, fraternity, and Turkic-Islamic values) emerges as a salient reference point in their identity formation. Participants reported acquiring knowledge of Yesevi through family transmission, religious education, and official historical narratives in Kazakhstan. At the same time, the academic environment in Türkiye appears to foster critical reflection, prompting a re-evaluation and reinterpretation of these inherited perspectives. The study demonstrates how cultural heritage is reproduced within a diasporic context and how it shapes individual identity perceptions. It concludes that Yesevi's teachings continue to function as a unifying and meaning-making element for Kazakh youth, even in contemporary settings. Moreover, the "Four Gates" doctrine operates not only as a historical instrument of identity construction but also as an enduring framework influencing Kazakh students in Türkiye today—serving as a key reference point in their engagement with spiritual values, cultural belonging, and the broader search for meaning.

KEYWORDS: Ahmed Yasawi, The Doctrine of Four Gates, Identity, National identity, Search for meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by accelerating modernization and globalization, the question of how cultural and spiritual traditions persist within contemporary identity formations has gained renewed scholarly significance. National identity, far from being a fixed or primordial construct, is increasingly understood as a dynamic and multilayered process shaped by historical memory, cultural transmission, and ongoing reinterpretation. Within this framework, the legacy of Ahmet Yesevi occupies a distinctive position in the cultural and spiritual landscape of Central Asia, particularly in relation to Kazakh identity. As a formative figure in the vernacularization of Islam, Yesevi's teachings (articulated through accessible language, ethical principles, and socially embedded practices) have historically contributed to the integration of religious values into everyday life and collective consciousness.

The Yesevi tradition, grounded in concepts such as *hikmet*, humility, service, and moral responsibility, functioned not merely as a religious doctrine but as a cultural interface mediating between Islamic universalism and local lifeworlds. By translating abstract theological principles into the symbolic and linguistic repertoire of Turkic-speaking communities, it facilitated both the internalization of ethical norms and the formation of a shared moral horizon. This process enabled the emergence of a distinctive Turkic-Islamic cultural synthesis, in which spiritual values became embedded in oral literature, ritual practices, and social institutions. Consequently, Yesevi's legacy has extended beyond its historical origins, continuing to inform cultural memory and identity constructions across generations.

However, contemporary transformations (particularly secularization, urbanization, and the global circulation of cultural forms) have reconfigured the ways in which such legacies are perceived and appropriated by younger generations. The extent to which Yesevi's teachings retain their relevance, and the forms through which they are reinterpreted, remain open empirical questions. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the historical, theological, or literary dimensions of Yesevi thought, while comparatively less attention has been devoted to its contemporary resonance within the lived experiences and value systems of youth.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Kazakh university students in Türkiye engage with, interpret, and position Yesevi's

teachings within their own frameworks of meaning and identity. Drawing on qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews, the study explores three interrelated dimensions: (i) the level and sources of knowledge regarding Yesevi, (ii) the significance of his ethical and spiritual principles in shaping contemporary value orientations, and (iii) his role in the ongoing construction of Kazakh national identity under conditions of modernization and globalization.

By situating participant narratives within broader theoretical frameworks of cultural memory, social identity, and nationalism, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how historical-spiritual figures continue to function as symbolic resources in contemporary identity formation. In doing so, it argues that Yesevi's legacy neither persists unchanged nor disappears entirely; rather, it is selectively reinterpreted and recontextualized, operating as a flexible cultural repertoire that mediates between tradition and modernity.

1.1. Construction of National Identity

The concept of national identity rests on a shared sense of "we," functioning as a moral bond that holds society together. It embodies a conceptual unity through which individuals, even without personal acquaintance, recognize themselves as members of the same community. Benedict Anderson's notion of *deep, horizontal comradeship* (1991, p. 22) elucidates how this sense of commonality is constituted within nations. In this view, individuals develop moral obligations toward one another and may relinquish personal interests for the public good. Similarly, David Miller (1988, p. 648) interprets such attachment not merely as belonging but as an action-oriented commitment prioritizing the common good. National identity thus institutionalizes social solidarity through shared memories at the cognitive level and trust and belonging at the affective level.

The historical and normative foundation of this moral solidarity lies in the convergence of inherited collective memories and consent continually reproduced in the present. In other words, the normative basis of national unity derives from shared memories transmitted across generations. As articulated by Ernest Renan and Thom (2013), the nation is a large-scale community of solidarity shaped by past sacrifices and the present will to live together. This perspective defines national unity not through fixed criteria such as ethnicity, language, or religion, but through voluntary commitment to coexistence. Consequently, the idea of national unity

moves beyond exclusionary essentialism, evolving into a form of political morality grounded in shared purposes. From this standpoint, the nation is not an immutable community of blood ties but a dynamic social contract, continually reaffirmed through collective experience.

This conception of historically grounded and voluntary unity aligns with modern liberal principles of individual freedom and equal citizenship. Within the liberal tradition, national identity is not viewed as conflicting with these principles but as reinforcing them. Its value lies in transforming individuals from abstract bearers of rights into members of a community bound by shared belonging and mutual recognition. As emphasized by Yael Tamir (1993, pp. 16-18), nationalism is not merely an exclusionary or emotional attachment; rather, it constitutes a set of commendable values that address individuals' needs for self-respect, meaning, and community, while remaining compatible with liberal justice. Accordingly, national unity can function in pluralistic societies not as a force that suppresses difference but as a cohesive fabric sustaining social cooperation¹

This binding function operates not only at the societal level but also within individual morality and public responsibility. National identity renders visible the fact that individuals are already embedded in social relations, thereby enabling the internalization of rights and duties not merely on legal grounds but through moral motivation. Bonds of belonging become constitutive of personal identity, translating abstract principles of justice into everyday conduct and responsibility. As David Miller (1988, p. 650) observes, this dynamic strengthens trust in shared institutions and enhances the distribution of public obligations. National identity thus constitutes not only an affective attachment but also a practical capacity for the provision of public goods, collective responses to crises, and the continuity of common life.

At a higher level, this moral motivation is reflected in the experience of national belonging as a non-instrumental community. Experiencing the nation in such terms enables a form of collective

identity that transcends individual rationality. Benedict Anderson's characterization of the nation as a community "worth dying for" captures this transgression of instrumental reasoning. Within this framework, the nation is imagined as a moral community beyond calculations of individual interest. National symbols, rituals, and narratives do more than represent; they generate an affective regime that embodies ideals of shared sacrifice and commitment. Craig Calhoun (1997) argues that this regime reproduces the emotional energy sustaining public solidarity and transforms citizens' willingness to bear material or bodily costs for collective purposes into a source of political legitimacy. Accordingly, national unity derives less from rational agreement than from the enduring ethic of shared sacrifice (Anderson, 1991, p. 159; Calhoun, 1997, pp. 5-7; Berezin, 2002, pp. 359-374).

As becomes evident, theories of nation and identity address both the cultural and political dimensions of national identity, seeking to explain how it is historically constructed and sustained in contemporary societies. From this perspective, national identity is not only the product of an imagined sense of belonging but also a political principle institutionalized through the mechanisms of the modern state. As emphasized by *Imagined Communities*, the nation exists insofar as individuals believe themselves to belong to the same community, even without direct acquaintance.

Explanations of this construction process vary across theoretical frameworks. Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach contends that nations are not purely modern inventions but are shaped through the reinterpretation of pre-existing myths, symbols, and collective memories into modern identities. Similarly, Eric Hobsbawm (1983) conceptualizes this transformation through the notion of "invented traditions," arguing that many ostensibly ancient national rituals and symbols were deliberately constructed in the modern era to reinforce unity. Taken together, these approaches suggest that national identity functions not solely through exclusion or conflict but also as a form of social solidarity that brings individuals together

¹ The intellectual tradition commonly termed liberal nationalism interprets national identity not as a form of belonging that conflicts with individual freedom and equal citizenship, but as a moral and cultural bond that sustains the continuity of contemporary societies. From this perspective, a purely legal framework is insufficient for individuals to make sense of their rights and obligations; a shared identity, historical memory, and public culture are equally necessary. Yael Tamir (1993) argues that nationalism should not be reduced to exclusionary passions but understood as a constellation of values that foster self-respect,

meaning, and a sense of community, while remaining compatible with liberal justice. This interpretation transforms national identity from a potentially oppressive ideology into the idea of a "moral community" that encourages solidarity among free and equal individuals. Accordingly, within the liberal tradition, national identity is conceived as a binding cultural framework that enables public cooperation and mutual recognition in pluralistic societies. For a broader theoretical overview, see Umut Özkırmlı, *Nationalism Theories: A Critical Introduction*.

around shared meanings, purposes, and values (Anderson, 1991, p. 6; Gellner, 1983, p. 1; Smith, 1991, p. 14; Hobsbawm, 1983, pp. 6-7).

When these cultural and historical construction processes intersect with individual-level identification dynamics, the psychological foundations of national belonging become more explicit. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive self-esteem not only from personal achievements but also from the groups to which they belong. As formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), individuals foreground group membership to achieve positive distinctiveness. This mechanism is particularly pronounced during youth, when individuals seeking identity tend to identify with prototypical figures representing the collective "we," thereby internalizing group values. This process shapes not only who they are, but also what they stand for. As Blake Ashforth and Fred Mael (1989) demonstrate, such forms of belonging generate loyalty, normative alignment, and commitment to shared goals. Similarly, Jean Phinney (1990) shows that emotional attachment to national identity during adolescence and early adulthood enhances social participation and solidarity. In this sense, social identity dynamics underpin the affective and behavioural bases of national belonging.²

This process of psychological internalization is further reinforced at the societal level through cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. From this perspective, identity is understood not merely as an outcome of individual cognition but as a regime of remembrance sustained through rituals, narratives, and spatial practices. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that communities reconstruct the past in line with present needs, with memory always framed collectively. Jan Assmann (2011) emphasizes that such memory produces long-term identity horizons through texts, ceremonies, and "sites of memory." Likewise, Paul Connerton (1989) highlights that social memory is transmitted not only cognitively but also bodily, through practices such as commemorations, national anthems, and flag rituals. Accordingly, national identity is sustained through a symbolic repertoire ranging from epics and anthems to monuments and sacred spaces. Moreover, the ideals of national unity and the common good are continually reproduced across generations..

1.2. Ahmet Yesevi and the Foundations of the Yesevī Tradition

The historical context of twelfth-century Turkestan reflected a dynamic social structure in which settled urban life in Transoxiana and the Syr Darya basin coexisted with nomadic and semi-nomadic zones. The process of Islamization, which had accelerated during the Samanid period (ninth-tenth centuries), acquired an institutional character under the Qarakhanids, the Great Seljuks, and the Khwarazmshahs. While urban centers such as Bukhara and Samarkand became focal points of legal (*fiqh*), hadith, and Sufi educational networks, the Yesi (Turkestan) Sayram corridor functioned as a key zone for the dissemination of Islam among Turkic-speaking communities. This interaction produced a distinctive Turkic-Islamic cultural synthesis in which Islamic norms were integrated with local cultural motifs (Yazıcı, 1993, pp. 9-10).

Within this historical milieu, Ahmet Yesevi played a central role in rooting Islam in the Turkestan region through vernacular language and practice. Although his biography contains hagiographical elements, its main contours are well established. He was born in Sayram (or, according to some sources, Yesi), initiated into Sufism by Arslan Baba in Yesi, and later joined the teaching circle of Yusuf al-Hamadani in Bukhara. Around 1160, he transferred his spiritual authority to Abd al-Khaliq al-Ghujdawani and returned to Yesi, where he spent the remainder of his life in ascetic retreat. He is generally believed to have died in 562/1166. This trajectory demonstrates both his connection to early Sunni-Sufi milieus and his establishment of a Yesi-centered spiritual guidance network (Eraslan, 1989, pp. 159-161; Yazıcı, 1993, pp. 3, 10).

According to Eraslan (1994), the foundations of Yesevī teaching rest on two interrelated principles: the integration of Sunni creed with practice through a balance between *Sharia* and *Tariqa*, and the dissemination of religious guidance through vernacular language and culturally embedded forms. Yesevi's didactic poems, known as *hikmets* (composed primarily in syllabic meter and quatrain form) address themes such as moral instruction, asceticism, worship, and ethical conduct. Their principal aim was to communicate the tenets of Islam to new converts and broader segments of society in their native language. The historical development of

² For further theoretical elaboration, see Umut Özkırmı, *Nationalism Theories: A Critical Introduction*; Fuat Keyman, *Globalization, Democracy and Civil Society*; Ayşe Kadioğlu, *The Transformation of Citizenship*; Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*:

*Civilization and Veiling*³; and Tanıl Bora, *Three States of the Turkish Right and the Dark Spring of Nationalism*

the *Dīvān-i Hikmet* corpus, including its posthumous compilation and the presence of multiple Turkic dialects, indicates that this tradition functioned not as a static canon but as a dynamic and circulating repertoire of spiritual instruction (Eraslan, 1994, pp. 429-430; Yazıcı, 1993, p. 9).

This intellectual foundation became institutionalized at the level of Sufi practice under the name of Yesevism (*Yeseviyye*). The tradition established a communal structure centered on vocal (*jahrī*) dhikr, spiritual conversation (*sohbet*), and service (*hizmet*), while legitimizing its lineage through Arslan Baba and Yusuf al-Hamadani. Through Yesevi's disciples (such as Mansur Ata, Sufi Muhammad Danishmend, and Hâkim Ata) a wide-ranging network of spiritual guidance extended across both urban and steppe regions, fostering an inclusive form of religiosity among settled and nomadic populations alike. One of the most significant outcomes of this structure was the strengthening of a civil-religious sense of unity and the enhancement of social cohesion around shared symbols and rituals. Moreover, the use of Turkic-language instruction appears to have facilitated the internalization of religious belonging and meaning-making among younger generations (Tosun, 2013, pp. 487-490; Eraslan, 1994, pp. 429-430).

1.3. *Hikmet, Service, Humility, Justice, Ethics, and the Preservation of Language*

Hikmet, a foundational element of Yesevī teaching, frames knowledge not merely as intellectual accumulation but as a moral and social responsibility to be transmitted. According to Yazıcı (1993, pp. 9-10), Yesevī's didactic poems (composed in syllabic meter) function as pedagogical instruments translating the unity of *Sharia* and *Tariqa* into an accessible vernacular. Eraslan (1994, pp. 429-430) likewise emphasizes that the *Dīvān-i Hikmet* educates the public by articulating the balance between faith, practice, and ethics in a clear and simple language. In this sense, *hikmet* constitutes the core of Sufi pedagogy as the public expression of intuitive wisdom.

The ethical order underpinning this teaching develops through the interrelated concepts of service (*hizmet*), humility (*tevazu*), and justice (*adalet*). Yesevism integrates individual spiritual perfection with social benefit: practices such as vocal (*jahrī*) dhikr, *sohbet*, hospitality, and care for the poor transform worship into a medium of social solidarity. Within this framework, service represents the enactment of spiritual maturation for the benefit of others. Similarly, the discipline of the self (grounded

in humility and ascetic restraint) legitimizes the authority of the spiritual guide not through charisma but through exemplarity and service. Hagiographical narratives of Yesevī's retreat into seclusion encode distance from worldly power as an ethical principle, while justice functions as a criterion through which personal virtue is tested in social relations. Thus, ethics emerges as a normative framework sustaining both individual purification and communal order (Eraslan, 1989, pp. 159-161; 1994, pp. 429-430; Tosun, 2013, pp. 487-490).

The linguistic orientation of Yesevism secures the cultural continuity of this holistic spiritual framework. The use of Turkic as the medium of instruction enabled Islamic concepts to be integrated into local semantic worlds and internalized by broader audiences.

This vernacular articulation was not merely translational but constituted a mode of meaning-making in its own right. In this respect, language enhanced both the accessibility of spiritual guidance and the transmission of cultural memory across generations (Yazıcı, 1993, pp. 9-10; Eraslan, 1994, pp. 429-430). The historical expansion of Yesevism paralleled the institutionalization of these values: as Devin DeWeese (1999, pp. 507-510) notes, a lodge-centered network of guidance developed through disciples such as Mansur Ata, Hâkim Ata, and Sufi Muhammad Danishmend, enabling dynamic circulation between steppe and urban settings. These lineage- and service-based local networks gradually institutionalized through claims of sacred descent and endowment structures, forming a socio-religious organization deeply embedded in everyday life rather than a strictly formalized Sufi order (Tosun, 2013, pp. 487-490).

Although anti-religious policies during the Soviet period rendered these organizational structures more fragile, the Yesevī legacy persisted through everyday religious practices, pilgrimage, and oral memory. As public expressions of religiosity diminished, Islam was reinterpreted within the framework of national culture, transforming the Yesevī heritage into a cultural component of ethno-national identity (Adeeb Khalid, 2007, pp. 50-86, 84-115).

Since the 1990s, renewed pilgrimage activity centered on shrine complexes in Turkestan, the republication of the *Dīvān-i Hikmet* in contemporary languages, and the incorporation of Yesevī narratives into national identity discourses have rendered the unifying social role of this tradition increasingly visible (Bruce G. Privratsky, 2001, pp. 53-66, 168-172; Rachel Harris, 2019, pp. 2155-2156).

1.4. Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Memory

Collective memory is not the aggregate of individual recollections but a dynamic regime of remembrance organized within social frameworks that continually reorder the past in light of present needs. Maurice Halbwachs argues that this regime provides a cognitive and institutional scaffold that guides group members not only in what to remember but also how to remember it, with intermediary institutions such as family, school, and religious communities concretizing these frameworks and reinforcing belonging (1992, pp. 38-40). From this sociological vantage point, the traditions, pilgrimages, and ritual practices associated with the Yesevî heritage can be understood as mechanisms that anchor Kazakh youths' national identity in a coherent narrative of the past, thereby strengthening horizons of solidarity and the common good.

Building on this framework, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory introduces an analytical distinction between memory types. While short-lived communicative memory remains confined to everyday interactions, cultural memory (transmitted across generations through material and symbolic carriers such as texts, rituals, and sites of memory) stabilizes identity norms. According to Assmann (2011, pp. 6-8), canonized texts and ritual practices do not merely convey these norms; they render them affectively and symbolically "natural," thereby renewing the legitimacy of the social order. In this light, the *hikmets* attributed to Yesevi and the cyclical commemorative and pilgrimage practices surrounding his shrine function as mechanisms that continually reconstruct the semiotic infrastructure of national belonging.

At this juncture, Yesevî's *hikmet* tradition operates as an interface between oral culture and written text, facilitating the affective internalization of values. Didactic poetry (structured through syllabic meter and vernacular idioms) translates the unity of *Sharia* and *Tariqa* into the language of everyday religiosity, while performances following *sohbet* and *dhikr* gatherings consolidate learned content through performative repetition. The circulation of *Dīvān-i Hikmet* manuscripts across diverse dialects and compilations further attests to the flexibility and inclusivity of this pedagogical process. In this way,

the preservation of language and core values such as service and humility are transmitted to younger generations through accessible, rhythmic, and memorable narrative forms (Eraslan, 1994, pp. 429-430; Harris, 2019, pp. 2155-2156; Yazıcı, 1993, pp. 9-10).

This transmission, however, is not merely cognitive. The construction of intergenerational belonging through religious and spiritual heritage also requires embodied practices. Paul Connerton (1989, pp. 4-5) demonstrates how social continuity is inscribed in ritual and bodily techniques as forms of practical knowledge, while Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000, pp. 3-5) conceptualizes religious tradition as an unbroken chain of memory linking past and present through ethical and affective bonds. Practices associated with Yesevî (such as pilgrimage, devotional recitation, and service) render this chain visible, generating a shared horizon of meaning and a sense of ethical responsibility among youth, while reinforcing the civic-moral fabric of national identity and sustaining social solidarity. The transmission of intergenerational belonging thus constitutes not only a cognitive process but also an embodied cultural experience in which the past is relived through ritual, service, and visitation. As Şerif Mardin (1989, pp. 21-24) observes, religious traditions in Türkiye have historically functioned as foundational elements of affective solidarity, embedding communal consciousness within everyday life. From this perspective, Yesevî-affiliated practices of visitation and service produce a form of moral community that integrates belief with social conduct. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (2002) further explains the influence of the Central Asian and Anatolian Sufi tradition through an ethic of word and service, emphasizing that dervishes transmitted not only religious teachings but also behavioral codes and ethical patterns. Complementing this view, İsmail Kara (2011) underscores that Islamic tradition in Türkiye persists not only as intellectual continuity but also as a form of embodied memory, lived through practice.

1.5. The Influence of Yesevî Teachings on Kazakh Culture

According to Adilbayeva, the local form assumed by popular Sufism in the Kazakh steppe is closely linked to Yesevism's mediating role in translating Islamic teachings into everyday practice.³ Through

³ Yesevism did not transmit the abstract theological discourse of Islam (such as madrasa-based *kalām* or *fiqh*) in a direct form; rather, it reinterpreted these doctrines through everyday language, symbols, and social practices accessible to the broader population, thereby adapting them to the steppe context. In this sense,

Yesevism functioned as an interface translating the abstract principles of Islam into the local cultural framework of the Kazakh people. This mediation enabled religious teaching to be lived not only at the level of belief but also through practical, customary, and aesthetic domains, including oral narratives, rituals, music,

its Turkic *hikmet* discourse, Yesevī guidance integrated Islam into nomadic social life, customary norms, and local symbolic worlds, thereby increasing the permeability between scholarly Islam and popular religiosity. This permeability also acquired institutional continuity through communities around the central shrine in Yesi-Turkestan that traced their lineage to Khoja Ahmed Yesevī (the *khoja/koja* groups) and asserted claims of legitimacy and mediation on that basis (Adilbayeva, 2002, pp. 45-46; DeWeese, 1999, pp. 507-509; Çetin, 2025, pp. 405-406).

The influence of Yesevism on language and literature is clearly visible in its transmission of religious teachings to the public through Turkic expression rather than Arabic or Persian. Khoja Ahmed Yesevī's poetic counsels, known as *hikmets*, developed an accessible form through plain language, rhythmic repetition, and an intimate didactic tone. This style is similarly reflected in Kazakh oral literature, including epics, *aytis*⁴, and didactic verse. In this way, Islamic concepts and moral values became organically embedded within local narrative traditions. Yet this influence was not confined to written or oral texts; it also continued in music and ritual. Melodic forms performed in devotional songs, dhikr, and collective ceremonies, together with religious musical practices surrounding lodges, spiritual lineages, and shrines, enabled Yesevī teaching to be sustained aesthetically. Thus, through both oral culture and music, the Yesevī tradition contributed to the rooting of Islam within local culture (Adilbayeva, 2002, pp. 45-47, 55; Canbay & Nacakçı, 2017, pp. 43-47; Privratsky, 2001, p. 168).

In the domains of ethics, solidarity, and customary order, the Yesevī legacy fostered an ethical orientation toward the common good by embedding Sufi norms of humility, generosity, service, and communal benefit within Kazakh social life. The long-term structural feature of modern Kazakh religiosity (the harmonious articulation of Islamic norms with customary order) became

institutionalized through popular Sufism in life-cycle rituals, commemorative meals for the deceased, *as/zar/zikir* circles, and practices of respect for ancestral spirits. Studies show that Kazakh belief systems and legal customs adapted to Islamic canons without abrupt rupture, and that this adaptation played a decisive role in producing collective identity and communal consciousness (Syzdykova, 2017, pp. 95-97, 100-101; Çetin, 2025, pp. 405-407).

At the institutional level, the integration of the Yesevī heritage into public-cultural policy and academic research agendas accelerated after independence. The decision of the Parliament of Kazakhstan on 19 June 2018 granting Turkestan special status as the "cultural and spiritual centre of the Turkic peoples" generated programmatic momentum for researching, preserving, and enhancing the public visibility of sacred sites, especially the Yesevī mausoleum. Initiatives such as *Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan* have been reflected in education, cultural programming, national memory projects, curriculum design, and youth-oriented activities (Shilmambetov & Maldybek, 2022, pp. 151-152).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed in-depth interviews as the primary data collection technique, conducting interviews with four Kazakh students. In qualitative research, in-depth interviewing is widely preferred for its capacity to elicit participants' experiences, cognitive frameworks, and meaning-making processes in detail (Uslu & Demir, 2023, p. 289; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021, p. 108). Its flexible structure enables the researcher to maintain face-to-face interaction while following predetermined themes and pursuing emergent topics. This approach yields contextually grounded data that reflect participants' perspectives rather than surface-level information. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide but were adaptively refined in response to participants' answers, ensuring both

and forms of social solidarity. Accordingly, Devin DeWeese (1999, pp. 507-509) notes that the Yesevī lineage in Central Asia served as an intermediary mechanism strengthening religious legitimacy and communal belonging among popular strata, while Adilbayeva (2002, pp. 45-46) emphasizes that Yesevism constituted a form of cultural translation reconciling Islamic values with the nomadic lifeways of Kazakh society.

⁴ *Aytis* is an oral poetic genre in which two *akyns* (folk poets) compete before an audience, usually accompanied by the *dombira*, through improvised verse that displays wit, intellect, and rhetorical skill. It broadly corresponds to the Turkish tradition of *atışma* within Kazakh oral culture (Urakova Yanç, 2021, pp. 275-276). According to Altinkaynak and colleagues, these performances interweave contemporary political and social issues,

local identity and values, ethical critique, and humour; the dialogic relationship with the audience and the principle of immediate response heighten both the dramatic tension and public function of the tradition (Altinkaynak, Ashimova, & Nauanova, 2018, pp. 430-433). The genre is therefore not merely a literary duel but also a cultural medium through which the "voice of the people" conveys current concerns to authorities. Ritualized openings, greetings, waiting without interrupting the opponent, and prevailing through wit constitute the normative frame of performance (Biray, 2003, p. 59; Altinkaynak et al., 2018, pp. 434-440). Thus, at the intersection of oral tradition, music, and public discourse, *aytis* functions as a dynamic medium carrying both aesthetic creativity and social deliberation (Urakova Yanç, 2020, pp. 51-52).

comparability across cases and nuanced understanding of individual narratives (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020, p. 5).

The defining feature of in-depth interviewing is that it extends beyond a simple question-answer format, establishing a conversational space oriented toward understanding participants' lifeworlds, as well as their cognitive and emotional processes. Osborne and Grant-Smith (2021, p. 108) note that this method allows researchers to examine subjective experiences, life histories, and underlying assumptions in depth. Accordingly, rather than aiming at generalization, in-depth interviewing seeks a context-sensitive and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

In practice, however, in-depth interviewing entails both opportunities and challenges. Rutledge and Hogg (2020, p. 5) emphasize that it requires detailed engagement with a limited number of participants and involves critical decisions regarding time, setting, question design, and the establishment of trust between interviewer and participant. Despite its demands in terms of labor and expertise, the method is frequently employed across disciplines due to the richness and multidimensionality of the data it generates (Uslu & Demir, 2023, p. 293).

3. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

3.1. Recognition of Ahmet Yesevi's Teachings

Participant K1 acknowledged limited in-depth knowledge of Ahmet Yesevi's teachings but emphasized awareness of his strong spiritual legacy in Central Asia. While studying sociology, K1 encountered Yesevi's human-centered approach, particularly his emphasis on humility and service, highlighting the principle "service to humanity is service to God" as personally meaningful. This suggests that although not fully internalized, Yesevi's value system is recognized and understood in its contemporary relevance. K2, by contrast, identified Yesevi primarily as a historical and religious figure who transmitted Sufi Islam to Central Asia, yet argued that his influence remains largely confined to the religious domain and does not significantly shape modern Kazakh culture or language. This indicates a perception of Yesevi's legacy as spiritually significant but culturally limited. K3 reported learning about Yesevi through formal education and secondary sources, associating him mainly with ethical values such as goodness, humility, and morality. Similarly, K4 described encountering Yesevi in school and books, portraying him as an important thinker in the Turkic-Islamic

world who taught virtue and modesty in an accessible language. Despite limited detailed knowledge, K4 emphasized Yesevi's communicative clarity and moral guidance.

Taken together, participant accounts position Yesevi within a multidimensional interpretive framework among contemporary Kazakh youth. K1's emphasis on value-oriented meaning aligns with Max Weber's concept of value-rational action (*Wertrationalität*), whereby social action is guided by moral or spiritual values even in modern contexts. In contrast, K2's historically bounded interpretation resonates with Eric Hobsbawm's notion of the "invention of tradition," suggesting that historical figures may be selectively reinterpreted within national identity formation, with varying contemporary resonance.

K3 and K4's focus on moral virtues reflects Émile Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, wherein shared ethical values function as integrative social representations. Moreover, K4's portrayal of Yesevi as a figure who communicates in a language accessible to the people parallels Antonio Gramsci's idea of the "organic intellectual," who engages directly with the lived experiences of society rather than producing abstract elite discourse.

Finally, the participants' reliance on school education, books, and cultural memory as primary sources of knowledge can be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which highlights how educational and social resources shape individuals' interpretive frameworks. Variations in participants' understandings of Yesevi appear closely linked to differences in such cultural capital. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Ahmet Yesevi is perceived not merely as a historical figure but as a dynamic reference point generating ethical, social, and cultural meaning for contemporary Kazakh youth.

3.2. The Place of Ahmet Yesevi's Thought in the Value World of Contemporary Kazakh Youth

When participant accounts are considered holistically, Ahmet Yesevi's thought appears to persist within the value world of contemporary Kazakh youth in varying degrees rather than disappearing altogether. K1 characterizes Yesevi's influence as "weakened but still present," particularly in family-transmitted values such as respect, humility, and altruism. This observation aligns with Émile Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness, which posits that shared norms and values continue to shape individuals implicitly even amid social change. By contrast, K2 interprets

Yesevi's influence as indirect, suggesting that contemporary youth are more oriented toward national identity and culture. This view resonates with Eric Hobsbawm's argument that modern nation-building often reconfigures cultural identity within a more secular framework, where national values may supersede explicitly religious references.

In the perspectives of K3 and K4, however, Yesevi remains influential in domains such as spirituality, morality, and honesty. This emphasis can be interpreted through Max Weber's concept of value-rational action, according to which certain behaviours continue to be guided by moral and cultural principles. K3's assertion that Yesevi is "still influential for some youth" indicates that ethical orientations can retain significance at the individual level despite modern life conditions. Similarly, K4 acknowledges the growing orientation toward modern lifestyles but maintains that Yesevi's teachings remain a guiding reference in matters of integrity and spirituality. This pattern is also consistent with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, whereby values transmitted through family, education, and social environments persist across generations. The emphasis on moral and spiritual teachings in the responses of K1, K3, and K4 suggests that such forms of symbolic capital continue to inform ethical dispositions and behavioural orientations among youth.

Overall, participant evaluations indicate that Yesevi's thought does not exert a uniform influence on contemporary Kazakh youth; rather, it functions as a differentiated yet enduring reference point, particularly within moral and spiritual domains. In other words, Yesevi's values persist as underlying cultural codes—more pronounced for some individuals, attenuated for others, yet not entirely erased. This layered configuration reflects a social reality in which processes of modernization coexist with historical and spiritual legacies.

3.3. The Influence of Ahmet Yesevi on the Formation of Kazakh National Identity

When participant accounts are considered collectively, Kazakh national identity among youth emerges as a multilayered construct in which modern and traditional-spiritual elements coexist. K1's self-description as a "modern yet rooted" Kazakh youth, and the identification of Yesevi as the spiritual foundation of this identity, illustrate how contemporary and historical references are jointly mobilized in identity formation. This perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a dynamic process, continuously

reconstructed through reinterpretations of the past (1996, p. 4). In contrast, K2 emphasizes an independent yet nationally conscious identity grounded primarily in language, history, and traditions, while acknowledging Yesevi as a historical spiritual figure. This view resonates with Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, which foregrounds shared cultural and historical belonging over explicitly religious references in modern nation-building (1983, p. 13).

In the accounts of K3 and K4, however, a strong attachment to Kazakh identity is accompanied by the recognition of Yesevi as a figure reinforcing its spiritual dimension. K3 identifies Yesevi as supporting the moral-spiritual aspects of identity, while K4 attributes to him a formative role in shaping the ethical and belief systems of the Kazakh people. This orientation can be interpreted through Émile Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, which emphasizes the formative power of shared values and beliefs on individual identity (1995, p. 208). Their emphasis on spirituality suggests that national identity is constituted not only through cultural and historical practices but also through moral and symbolic frameworks.

Overall, participant evaluations indicate that Kazakh national identity is perceived as both open to the influences of modern life and grounded in historical-spiritual references. Within this framework, Ahmet Yesevi (although varying in perceived significance across participants) remains an enduring reference point sustaining the spiritual dimension of identity. This finding demonstrates that cultural and spiritual heritage is not erased in modern identity formation but is instead reinterpreted and repositioned in accordance with individual perceptions and contemporary contexts.

3.4. Transmission of Knowledge about Ahmet Yesevi through Family and School

Participant accounts indicate that knowledge of Ahmet Yesevi is acquired through both school and family, although its depth varies considerably. While K1 does not explicitly reference formal education, the view that Yesevi constitutes a spiritual foundation of national identity suggests an indirect cultural transmission via family or social environment. This pattern can be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which captures the internalization of cultural dispositions shaped by familial and social contexts (1986, p. 243).

K2 reports learning about Yesevi in school, though primarily within a historical rather than religious framework. This approach aligns with

Benedict Anderson's theory of national identity, which emphasizes the representation of historical figures as cultural and national symbols within secular educational systems (1983, p. 19). K3 and K4, in turn, note exposure to Yesevi through both school and family but describe this knowledge as limited in depth. These accounts suggest that formal education plays a largely introductory role, while familial transmission emphasizes moral and spiritual guidance. Émile Durkheim's conception of education as a central mechanism for transmitting social values across generations is thus both confirmed and qualified, insofar as educational institutions introduce Yesevi but do not engage with his teachings in depth (1956, p. 71).

Overall, the findings indicate that knowledge of Ahmet Yesevi has not disappeared but remains largely at the level of general cultural awareness. Although the combined influence of family and school sustains his role as a moral and identity-based reference, none of the participants report receiving comprehensive instruction. This pattern is consistent with sociological observations that cultural figures are often preserved symbolically within modern educational systems, while opportunities for deeper individual engagement remain limited.

3.5. The Meaning of Yesevi's Teachings on Spirituality, Humility, Service, and Ethics for Contemporary Kazakh Youth

When participant accounts are considered together, the core concepts in Ahmet Yesevi's teachings (spirituality, humility, service, and ethics) have not disappeared among contemporary Kazakh youth, but are being reinterpreted under the influence of modern life. K1 notes that these values may at times be perceived as "outdated" or "distant," yet emphasizes that spirituality and humility carry not only religious but also humanistic meanings. Humility is reframed as valuing others rather than self-effacement, and service as contributing to society. Similarly, K2 characterizes these values as universal, arguing that young people increasingly interpret them through social and human perspectives rather than strictly religious ones. This aligns with Max Weber's concept of value-rational action, which suggests that moral orientations may acquire secular meanings in modern contexts (1978, p. 24).

The perspectives of K3 and K4 indicate that while these values remain important, they can at times be overshadowed. K4's observation that youth are increasingly oriented toward material concerns resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of

consumer society, in which attachment to moral and spiritual values may weaken (2000, p. 82). Nevertheless, both K3 and K4 stress that Yesevi's teachings continue to remind individuals of the importance of compassion, humility, and the meaning of being human.

From a sociological perspective, these findings suggest that Yesevi's teachings have not vanished but persist as a reinterpreted "value framework" shaped by the demands of modern life and individual orientations. Concepts such as spirituality, humility, service, and ethics appear with varying intensity across participants, yet all acknowledge that these values continue to occupy a meaningful place within social memory and cultural identity.

3.6. The Role of Yesevi's Legacy in Preserving Kazakh Identity amid Modernization and Globalization

Despite the transformations induced by modernization and globalization, Ahmet Yesevi's legacy continues to function as a significant reference point in the preservation of Kazakh identity. K1 emphasizes that this legacy serves as a reminder of cultural roots and argues that modernization need not entail identity loss. Values such as spirituality, solidarity, ethics, and social responsibility are seen as enabling individuals to integrate into the modern world while remaining aligned with their cultural origins. This perspective is consistent with Anthony Giddens's view that identity under conditions of modernity is a continuously reconstructed project (1991, p. 5).

K2, by contrast, interprets Yesevi's legacy primarily as a historical linkage, suggesting that language, culture, traditions, and independent thought play a more decisive role in preserving identity. This emphasis aligns with Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation, which highlights the primacy of cultural and secular elements in the formation of national identity (1983, p. 48). K2's position further reflects the recontextualization of religious figures within the framework of cultural heritage in modern Kazakh society.

The perspectives of K3 and K4 offer a more integrative view, indicating that Yesevi's legacy contributes to the preservation of Kazakh identity within ongoing modernization processes by reinforcing awareness of cultural roots. This can be interpreted in light of Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of the role of tradition in sustaining collective continuity (1983, p. 4). Moreover, K4's assertion that "even as the world changes, it does not let us forget

who we are” supports Stuart Hall’s framework, which underscores the dynamic interplay between continuity and change in identity formation (1996, p. 4).

Taken together, these findings suggest that Yesevi’s legacy operates not merely as a religious doctrine but as a cultural resource that sustains continuity in the face of modernization and globalization. Although participants differ in how they evaluate its significance, a shared theme emerges: Yesevi’s teachings contribute to identity preservation by maintaining collective memory and reinforcing a sense of cultural belonging.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Ahmet Yesevi’s thought does not exert a uniform influence among contemporary Kazakh youth, yet persists with varying intensity across different domains. Participant accounts demonstrate that Yesevi’s teachings are being reinterpreted within a social context shaped by modernization, secularization, and globalization. In this framework, Yesevi is positioned simultaneously as a historical figure and as an ethical-spiritual reference point within the meaning systems of young individuals.

First, it emerges that knowledge of Yesevi is primarily transmitted through school, family, and broader cultural memory. However, this transmission generally remains at a surface level, with limited evidence of in-depth theological or Sufi understanding. Consistent with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, this suggests that cultural figures circulate symbolically within modern educational systems while levels of individual internalization vary. Nevertheless, for most participants, Yesevi continues to function as a moral authority associated with core values such as kindness, humility, honesty, and service.

Second, Yesevi’s influence appears particularly salient in the ethical and humanistic dimensions of youth value systems. The reinterpretation of concepts such as humility, service, and spirituality in non-religious, human-centered terms aligns with Anthony Giddens’s theory of modernity, which posits that traditional values are rearticulated in individualized and secularized forms. Thus, Yesevi’s teachings have not disappeared but continue to exist

through adaptive reinterpretations compatible with contemporary life practices.

Third, the role of Yesevi in shaping Kazakh national identity varies across participants. While some view him as a spiritual foundation of national identity, others interpret him primarily as a historical-cultural figure. This divergence is consistent with Stuart Hall’s perspective that identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed. Despite these differences, all participants acknowledge the enduring presence of Yesevi’s historical and spiritual legacy within the cultural memory of Kazakh identity.

Finally, despite the transformative pressures of modernization and globalization, Yesevi’s legacy continues to function as a key reference point sustaining cultural continuity. Participant evaluations suggest that his teachings mitigate identity fragmentation, reinforce social belonging, and preserve connections to cultural roots. This finding resonates with Eric Hobsbawm’s argument that cultural heritage is continually reconstituted in modern contexts as a resource for social cohesion.

Overall, Ahmet Yesevi’s thought neither constitutes a fully dominant guiding framework for contemporary Kazakh youth nor becomes entirely obsolete. Rather, it operates as a flexible cultural resource, reinterpreted within modern social conditions to generate meaning in both individual and collective identity formation. Accordingly, Yesevi’s legacy may be understood as a dynamic form of symbolic capital that continues to nourish the moral and spiritual dimensions of Kazakh identity despite processes of modernization.

4.1. Summary of Key Findings

(I) Although levels of knowledge about Yesevi vary, his moral and spiritual legacy persists within cultural memory despite modern conditions.

(II) Some participants interpret Yesevi as a contributor to the spiritual dimension of national identity, while others confine his influence to a historical-cultural framework.

(III) Values such as spirituality, humility, service, and ethics continue to exist in diverse forms among youth, functioning as cultural capital transmitted through family, education, and social environment.

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