

NATIONAL DNA AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: HOW TO TURN CULTURAL CODE INTO A COMMERCIAL SUCCESSFUL BRAND

Today, uniqueness is becoming one of the key factors of brand success. At the business conference of the 38th International Fashion Exhibition Central Asia Fashion Autumn-2026, experts discussed how to leverage cultural heritage and national identity to create an in-demand product, and examined successful case studies of brands that have made cultural code their competitive strength.

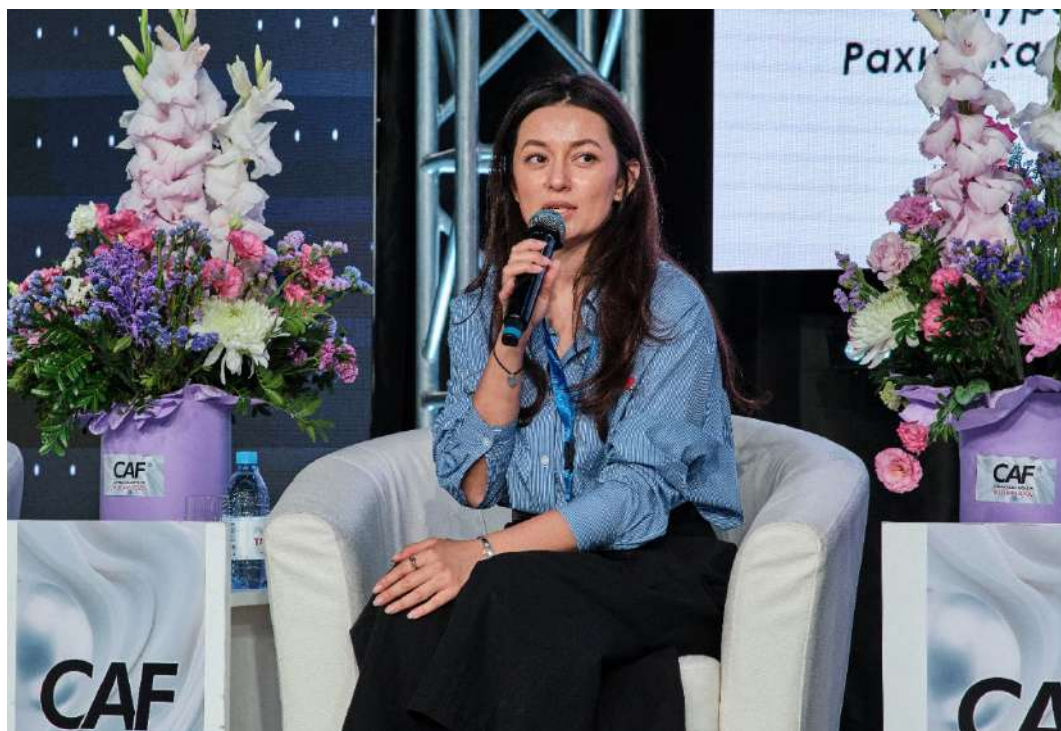
The session moderator, Ainura Rakhimzhanova, Head of the Marketplace Department at Lamoda Kazakhstan, directed her first question to a speaker from Uzbekistan — Charos Kamalova, co-founder and creative director of Teplo (Store, Fest, Market): «You work with a large number of local brands, so you see the market from the inside, so to speak. Why has national DNA become commercially in demand right now? Is this a long-term market shift, or still a temporary trend?»



Ainura Rakhimzhanova, Head of the Marketplace Department at Lamoda Kazakhstan

Charos Kamalova replied that Teplo is a project dedicated to local brands of Uzbekistan: «*It all started with me being a craftsperson myself — I loved to knit and wanted to build my own brand. When I couldn't find a platform where I wanted to exhibit, I decided to create one myself. That's how the market was born. At first it was small-scale formats, and then they evolved into full-scale urban festivals and city celebrations. In 2022 we opened our permanent space, Teplo Store, which operates daily. Today we collaborate with around a hundred designers on this platform. We also serve as a kind of bridge between the international and local market, hosting pop-ups in different countries. Our last pop-up, SOHO, ran for six months in London, where our designers appeared in open sales for the first time and began competing on equal terms with other major stores and brands. And right now, we are working on a platform that will support designers and serve as a kind of business assistant for them, because creative people don't want to think about numbers, don't want to deal with analytics, don't want to figure out how to analyze data — yet all of that is essential for business development. So, this software platform is emerging to help creative people handle those tasks. And based on our experience — we've been working with local brands since 2018 — we genuinely observe that local*

brands working with national DNA are becoming increasingly popular. I think this grew from the fact that globalization swept through every country, and in practically every city we see global brands, and all of it has become accessible. We started dressing more or less the same, and in reality, we want to be different — we want to know and understand who we are, what our style is, where our roots come from. This process can be called a trend: anti-globalization. Studying yourself, your origins, your culture is in vogue. The question of self-identification is also playing a major role right now. So, our brands are not simply making ethnic clothing — they have learned to create contemporary, relevant forms. Of course, it's natural that people enjoy wearing something they identify with. And I don't think this is a short-lived trend. The designers who are taking this seriously are only just getting started — they have only recently learned to work with this market. It will only get more interesting from here, because we will go deeper, work with meaning, and in doing so show ourselves to the world».



Charos Kamalova, co-founder and creative director of Teplo (Store, Fest, Market)

Ainura Rakhimzhanova immediately noted that Kazakhstan is precisely lacking such a community and platform with substantial experience working with local brands — something that is especially needed by domestic manufacturers and emerging designers. Continuing the conversation with Charos, the moderator asked what today actually turns national DNA into a real competitive advantage, and what, conversely, remains a beautiful concept that sounds compelling but delivers no commercial benefit to a brand.

The speaker replied that today a single image, a beautifully dressed window, or an impressively designed collection is no longer enough: «A brand needs to go deeper, work with its vision, and ask itself: «What do I actually want to say through my clothing? What do I want to convey to people? What idea lies behind it? What meanings do I want to communicate through it?» Brands that begin working with meaning are capable of attracting attention very quickly, because that is genuinely something that is lacking today. At the same time, it's important not to retreat entirely into ethnicity, not to turn all clothing into an ethnic costume. We need to remain accessible to a wider audience that may not know the local context and may not recognize that they are looking at a national pattern or a reference to a specific tradition. It is far more compelling when contemporary forms and current

trends combine with our own distinctive signature and cultural code. That kind of combination, in my view, is far more successful and helps a brand define its DNA more clearly, without losing relevance or legibility for a broad audience. If we are talking about specific examples, I would highlight the brand J.Kim from Uzbekistan. It was created by a woman of Korean descent, and she combines Korean culture with Uzbek context in a very interesting way. She draws on what she remembers from childhood, from the environment she grew up in: the mahalla, the kurpa, the kurpacha, various local objects and images that are distinctly Uzbek. And she has managed to blend all of this very organically with her Korean cultural heritage. Today, J.Kim is very relevant internationally as well — celebrities wear it, it is well known beyond the region. And yet it remains in demand within the region itself, because everything is so contemporary, beautiful, and precisely aligned with current trends that the clothing genuinely makes you want to wear it and share it further. It has become not simply clothing, but a kind of statement: we support our culture, our heritage, and we can speak about them in a contemporary language».

Charos Kamalova told the audience about another Uzbek brand with a national DNA that has managed to use local context effectively — Dildora Kasymova. «*She works in a completely different space — creating more couture, formal clothing — yet remains relevant. Her pieces genuinely make you want to wear them. Alongside her couture collections, she has also started creating everyday clothing, which is also very interesting. She reinterprets familiar items — denim jackets, for example — adding embroidery to them, and works with peplums. It was essentially she who introduced peplums into contemporary fashion in our country. Today many women wear beautiful embroidered peplums. And this is also a strong example of how, through your own vision and the use of traditional embroidery, you can incorporate local elements into everyday clothing — making them part of a modern wardrobe rather than leaving them exclusively within the realm of national dress. Brands like these can genuinely show a wider audience and the whole world what beautiful and distinctive elements exist in our region».*



CAF experts examined successful case studies of brands that have made cultural code their competitive strength

Aigul Kassymova, founder of the womenswear brand AIGUL KASSYMOVA, continued on the theme of national DNA not merely as a design element, but as a genuine competitive advantage of a brand: «*I believe that what makes us interesting to the world is precisely our roots, because people everywhere are in some ways the same. When it comes to clothing, everyone has two arms and two legs, and*

most of what could be designed has already been designed. So, what is genuinely interesting is to tell the world who we are, where we come from, and what makes us different. When we meet people from other countries, we always read each other through a certain cultural code. Brazil, Europe, Asia — every region has its own characteristics that we intuitively pick up on. Others read us the same way. We are interesting to the world precisely through our cultural code. And in my design work I try to convey it the way I personally feel it. It is very important to me that this cultural code can be worn every day — not only reserved for Nauryz or major holidays. Of course, holidays matter too, and they are probably where the fullest expression of tradition takes place. But our children grow up alongside us every single day. Every day we absorb things visually, take them in, remember them. And if you bring this cultural element into your everyday look daily, it gradually becomes a natural part of life. It allows you to build a significant result through small steps every day. In my case, that is essentially how it works. I always say that we stopped living in yurts every day and riding horses through the streets long ago. Our clothing changes in the same way — it needs to reflect the time we live in. But if you gradually embed elements of cultural code into contemporary clothing — even a little, even in proportion to the situation you find yourself in — it will still work and still matter. For me, that is my path: not turning cultural code into a costume for special occasions, but making it a natural part of everyday life».



Aigul Kassymova, founder of the womenswear brand AIGUL KASSYMOVA

Aizhan Kolchina, CEO of the brands Kolchina Uniform and the first northern ethno-brand Aqqaiyng, and a member of the Textile Business Association of Kazakhstan, shared her view on what most hinders domestic brands from turning strong ideas into sustainable production: «My brand was born in Petropavlovsk; it is dedicated to the nature, culture, and history of Northern Kazakhstan — my homeland Kazakhstan as a whole — and to the memory of my grandmother. My professional journey has been quite long and very eventful. I started with bespoke tailoring, making evening and wedding dresses for brides, graduates, and so on. Over time I had to grow my team so I wasn't doing everything alone. Of course, along the way many different situations arose related to people and the organization of work, because a team is the foundation that allows both a designer and an entrepreneur to grow. In recent years I have been working in corporate uniforms — the B2B segment. My brand Aqqaiyng is only a year old — we are still very small, but we are gradually working toward

our goals. In the past I was more of a maximalist: I wanted to produce a lot of everything immediately. «Let's just make everything now and sell it!» But that's not how it works. So, with Aqqaiyng I took a completely different approach: first I made one chapan, then another, and so on. I watched how people responded, what interested them, what resonated. As for what we lack — in my view, it's education. And not only for beginners, but for those of us who are already working designers as well. Bringing an idea to life has never been a problem for us. Reproducing it hasn't been either. But in order to scale, to understand how to develop an idea and turn it into a sustainable business, you need knowledge. You need to understand how to build a financial model, how to attract people, how to hire employees, how to build a team — in other words, you need a systematic approach to business, not just to design. We were taught to be designers: we know how to create, how to work with form, material, and color, how to conceive and realize ideas. But we had virtually no subjects like financial literacy, entrepreneurship fundamentals, or business management. There were general education disciplines, painting, drawing, and other subjects essential to the craft of the artist and designer. But the business component was almost entirely absent. So of course, you end up having to seek that knowledge on your own. Thankfully, today we have the internet, many educational opportunities, and we are far better informed than before. When I was a student, the situation was completely different. We would hear about design competitions or grants at the very last moment — when the work was due, figuratively speaking, yesterday. So today the opportunities are much broader, but a systematic approach to the education of designers is still not where it needs to be».

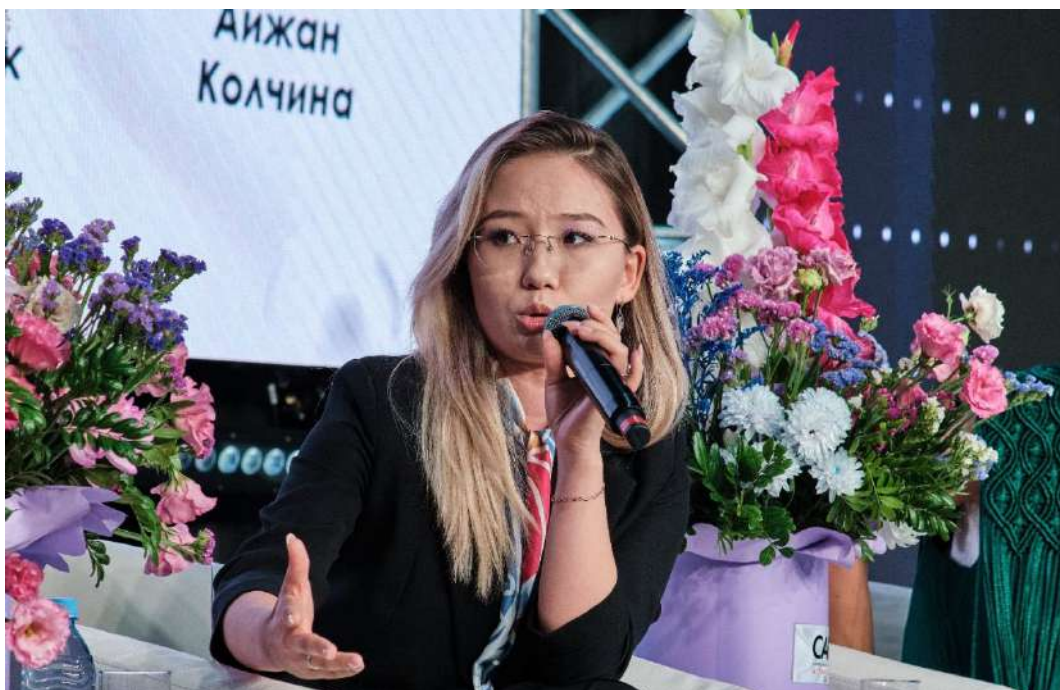


Aizhan Kolchina, CEO of Kolchina Uniform and the first northern ethno-brand Aqqaiyng

Aizhan Kolchina, like many other speakers at the business conference, highlighted the acute shortage of skilled personnel in the fashion industry: «I've tried different approaches to solving this problem. I organized sewing and pattern-making courses myself, trained people, and then took the best graduates onto my team. Then I went around to relevant vocational colleges to invite students for internships. But there is another nuance here: young people today don't particularly want to enter this field. It seems to them like a non-mainstream industry — not the most attractive or promising. And that is also a problem that needs to be addressed. And of course, we are very dependent on imports. We create a local brand, use prints inspired by Kazakhstan, work with ethnic elements — and yet we are still dependent on whether fabric will be delivered on time and how stably all the links in the

production chain will function. That is why I believe that an entire system needs to be built around a brand, and around a designer as well. A designer cannot develop in isolation: they need a team, production capacity, personnel, education, suppliers, and infrastructure. In other words, it is important to develop not only individual brands, but the entire industry as a whole. Only then will the fashion industry truly be able to grow, become sustainable, and become competitive».

Azalia Kazbekkyzy, Marketing Director of the brand ARGYMAQ, continued on the theme of a brand's national DNA: «ARGYMAQ is the first Kazakhstani premium clothing brand — this year it turns 10. We were among the first to blaze a trail in retail for national identity. Back in 2016, there were not many local brands that could meet customers' needs for clothing that matched a contemporary style while also embodying our roots. In particular, when it came to modern casual wear: you wanted to find clothing that was in line with current style but also allowed a person to express their connection to culture and heritage. So, since 2016, we have been producing clothing that incorporates national identity — but not overtly, rather natively: through recognizable symbolism familiar not only to Kazakhstanis, but to people across Central Asia. If we are talking about how the brand developed and how the national DNA story gained momentum, there is one important thing to understand: not every person wants to wear clothing where a print, an ornament, or a striking national element appears literally at every seam. Most of us in everyday life choose minimalism, contemporary casual. So, we focused specifically on that approach. For example, we took the symbol of the shanyrak — a recognizable image familiar to virtually everyone. What is a shanyrak? It is the crown of the yurt, symbolizing home, warmth, comfort, the family hearth, and the homeland. When we launched the first collection, it received a strong response from customers and became something genuinely interesting and new for the market. We then began expanding the range and collections, and in parallel made a point of telling the story of each symbol: where it comes from, what meanings it carries, why it deserves attention. That was especially important because not everyone immediately understood the concept of our brand. We entered the market as a premium brand, so, for example, the price of a T-shirt was above average, and we needed to explain why this product holds that kind of value».



Azalia Kazbekkyzy, Marketing Director of the brand ARGYMAQ

Azalia Kazbekkyzy laid out point by point what goes into the price: «First, production in Kazakhstan. This is design work — the specialists are not simply applying a beautiful ornament; they study the symbolism, research it, and interpret traditional elements in a contemporary way. It was important to us that a person not only recognize national symbolism when they see it, but genuinely want to wear it. Second, quality is a matter of principle for us. We try to work primarily with natural fabrics: if it's cotton, it's premium cotton; if it's linen, it's one hundred percent linen. In other words, from the very beginning the brand philosophy was built on the idea of a return to roots — but in a contemporary interpretation. As a marketing professional, I am particularly pleased that this trend has already spread far beyond Kazakhstan. Foreigners come to us, and our national DNA is becoming interesting to them as well. They are curious about how our brand's jewelry is constructed, how we combine a tulip and a swallow in a single design. For them it is unusual. We start telling the story, explaining the symbolism, and it becomes a genuine discovery for the person: «Wow, I've never seen anything like this before!» There is another interesting development that has been especially noticeable over the last two years. Our pieces have been purchased much more frequently as wedding gifts. Kazakhs have always had a tradition of giving gifts at weddings and tois. Historically, the more expensive, prestigious, and premium the gift you presented, the more powerfully you demonstrated your respect for the person. But over the past couple of years — especially after we expanded our range and began producing handcrafted artisan chapans — we noticed an interesting trend: they began selling very well specifically as gifts. And this too, in my view, is part of the development of our cultural code. When a person chooses to give not something imported but a product of domestic manufacture connected to our culture, that is gradually becoming a mark of status and good taste in its own right. In addition, several years ago we launched a children's collection. There is a specific meaning embedded in this as well: if we want to instill the national code, we need to do it from childhood. That is why I believe this is precisely how national DNA can be moved forward: not just placing traditional symbols on clothing, but creating a contemporary product that a person genuinely wants to wear, give as a gift, and pass on».

To Ainura Rakhimzhanova's question about what Kazakhstani brands' national DNA will look like in ten years — and what it needs to become to remain relevant to a new generation of buyers — Aidana Kudyspek, founder of the modest fashion brand AIKUDS, gave a detailed answer: «You might think that I've only been in this field for eight years — probably far less than many other market participants. But in reality, we are already moving in exactly this direction today. Over the next ten years I see local brands becoming far more mass-market. Right now, we genuinely have many domestic brands, but the majority are developing specifically in the premium segment. That kind of clothing is not always accessible to a wide audience. I chose a different path: I moved to mass production and now have my own workshop with a capacity of up to 8,000 units per month. This allows me to make my collections more affordable and offer them to a much broader audience. We work in basics, and I think many Kazakhstani brands should give serious thought to exactly this direction — how to make quality local clothing more accessible through their own production. And of course, in parallel, local production itself needs to be developed. I know our market well and see how domestic brands evolve. When it comes to scaling, a great many of them continue to keep production outsourced. And outsourcing usually means Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, or China — meaning the brand may be Kazakhstani, but the production itself is located outside the country. In my case, I am consciously building Kazakhstani production within the country. I currently have my own workshop in Almaty, and I want to continue developing precisely this direction. I believe that is what our future can look like: gradually, more and more brands will develop their own production. This will allow not only

the brands themselves to scale, but will also give a powerful boost to the development of light industry in Kazakhstan as a whole. And then we will be able not simply to create local brands, but to build a full-fledged domestic production base and become more competitive relative to our neighboring countries».



Aidana Kudyspek, founder of the modest fashion brand AIKUDS

The experts also discussed which factors today most hinder local brands from scaling. Charos Kamalova emphasized the value of a comprehensive education: *«I agree that this is very important — for building and planning your work correctly, for distributing the same resources intelligently, which are often very limited. Because our small brands are frequently born from an impulse. It's creativity, the desire to create, the desire to realize yourself, and at the very beginning — I speak from personal experience as well — you don't always plan to scale at all. But if we are already talking about sales and building a brand, then of course you need a comprehensive approach and knowledge across*



CAF business conference speakers (left to right): Ainura Rakhimzhanova, Charos Kamalova, Azalia Kazbekkyzy, Aizhan Kolchina, Aidana Kudyspek, Aigul Kassymova

different areas. Clearly, it's impossible to know everything. You can't be an expert in every aspect of business simultaneously. And so, it becomes very important to know how to attract the right people. In some cases that will mean a partnership; in others, finding platforms and organizations that can help with areas where the brand itself lacks expertise. And the second thing I would highlight is production. We know why local brands often cost more — especially when it comes to small volumes. The cost of production within our country is quite high. Producing a single garment requires significantly more resources, and as a result the cost per unit ends up considerably higher. That is why, in my view, it is our duty as consumers to support precisely this direction. And when we support local brands, when their sales volumes begin to grow, it becomes possible to gradually optimize production and reduce costs. The larger the production, the greater the opportunities for cost optimization. Every time we choose a local brand, we are effectively making a small contribution to the development of this industry — and to ensuring that in the future it becomes stronger, more sustainable, and more competitive in our region».

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