

– Chapter One –

The Origins of Kazakh Culture

The Kazakhs are the main population of the Republic of Kazakhstan and there are over 13 million Kazakhs in the world. Kazakhs are settled primarily in the Northeast of the Islamic belt of civilization, which stretches from North Africa to Central Asia. They are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. They are related to the Kipchak subgroup within the larger Turkic group of the Altai language family. In order to grasp this culture we need to look at it within its own setting of time and space. Then we will work towards identifying typical peculiarities of Kazakh culture. Kazakh culture is a successor of the nomadic culture of Great Eurasian steppes. Therefore we are going to begin the analysis of this national culture by looking at basic characteristics of nomadic culture.

Each (ethno)national culture functions in a living, human environment, not in a vacuum. 'Cultural space' is not an isolated, permanently fixed lot in life. It is a field watered by the ongoing flow of history. An important quality of cultural space is its defiance of absolute and total comprehension. For example, such a notion as "land of the ancestors" is sacred to nomads; it is a pledge which affirms the solidarity of their own territory as well as a recognition of the immunity of neighboring lands from intrusion or invasion. Intercommunal relations begin on the basis of territorial sovereignty. Geographical signs of the land of the ancestors are engraved in the mind of people as holy places, that is the environment consists of sacred mountains, rivers and lakes, valleys and hills, tombs where ancestors' spirits live, and so on. Its sacredness is bequeathed to the forthcoming generations in legends and myths, tales and adages.

People of a low intellectual level, morality, self-control and intuition would not be able to survive in a severe steppe environment. In a culture that is conformed to a particular space, people and nature are not separated by a "Great Wall of China." On the contrary, culture functions as a connecting link that signifies a delicate assonance (harmony) between them. In original Kazakh culture the ecological problem was directly related to such notions within the system of morality as "*obal*" (offense, misdeed, transgression, guilt) and "*sauap*" (reward, recompense, favor, kind deed).

In literature there is often the opinion that a culture that exists under the umbrage of nature is like a frozen, unchanging world. This perception could be explained by the fact that the continuous movement which is inherent in this culture goes unnoticed. Settling in just one spot of the boundless steppes would be contrary to the nomadic life-style. This life, being subjected to temporal vegetative patterns, exceeds the bounds of continuous rounds of motion. Certainly, this motion is recurring and consistent by its nature. Development of empty steppe regions is not about changing nature but, on the contrary, it is about becoming an integral part of it, which means that man would have to remain dependent on the natural phenomena occurring within his environment.

Let us look, then, at some of the means of land development in nomadic civilization. First of all, attention should be paid to the special role of the horse in nomadic life. By subduing the horse to man's will nomads took a great step toward land development.

According to K. Yaspers, in the process of transition from savagery to civilization, domestication of horses must be taken together on par with the emergence of ethnonational groups, the creation of irrigation systems and the invention of writing as being of great significance to mankind. Domestication of horses was a step forward from development of limited space to development of the entire world. It gave an opportunity for dialogue between different cultures.

From ancient times people would migrate from north to the south, from east to the west and vice versa. A well known theory indicates that the people of Sumer came to valley of 'The Two Rivers' from Central Asia, Indo-Germanic tribes entered India, Iran and Greece on their way south and Turkic tribes conquered Asia Minor. Nomadic Turkic-Mongol tribes were putting constant pressure on the Chinese Empire and India. A well-known scientist, A. Weber, believes that development of the Eurasian steppe lands by nomads caused the phenomenon known as "the Great Migration of People." It had a great impact on the formation of modern civilizations.

Nomadic people were especially skillful in using horses to explore new lands. Horse and Nomad looked like one whole creature. It is clearly seen in myths and legends of the neighboring nations. For instance, in the ancient Greek mythology a winged steed Pegasus helped to kill Chimera,

a monster that inspired terror to entire country. Centaur Chiron - a metaphor of mounted Scythian nomad – refused eternal life in order to help his friend Prometheus. This motif also appears in a story of friendship of Gilgamesh and a nomad Enkidu in the ancient Sumer epic.

The man that saddles a horse realizes that he is beginning to be released, that his will power increases and that he comes closer to the Cosmos. No matter how much his Mother-Land doesn't want to let him go, he makes a resolute step into the boundless world. In the Kazakh folk tradition of 'cutting the leg-harness' a toddler who is just beginning to make his first steps is being cut free from symbolic bondage.

In addition to the horse, other domesticated animals also helped nomads in mastering the (steppe land) space around them. A special place among them belongs to the dog. There is a reason why Kazakhs say that “dog is one of the seven treasures”.

In order to be able to use some sheep and cow products it is enough to simply tend them. But dogs and horses need to be tamed and trained, which requires a lot of skills and patience. And only then they become helpers to a man. Later on the Ottoman Turks, in order to keep people subdued in their Empire, practiced the following. Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History*, writes: “Ottoman Padishahs governed their empire with the help of specially trained slaves. They were the ones that increased the power of the Ottoman Empire.”

Mastering the boundless steppe does not have to do with perceiving it as merely immense space, but rather, it has to do with seeing the steppe region as one sole continuum. There is a great difference between ethnic regions and geographic concepts formed in the 20th century, on the one hand, and the idea of “Land of the Ancestors” in the times of the heyday of nomadic civilization on the other.

It is evident from the cultural heritage of the Kazakhs and other Turkic peoples that the entire Great Eurasian Steppe was considered to be the native land of the Turks. For instance, according to Kazakh epics Istanbul, the Crimea, Kazan, Kokand, Khiva, Altai, Ordos and others (i.e. the lands from modern Turkey across to NW China and Mongolia) appear as Turkic territories, while the Middle East and Egypt which lied southward beyond these Turkic territories occur as friendly countries that can be relied upon in difficult circumstances.

Naturally, this space was dependent upon the unbroken flow of time. The feeling of kinship was pushed aside whenever internal contradictions aggravated their circumstances. History shows that bloody battles would occur not only between big 'superethnoses' (civilizations), but within the internal structure of ethnic groups as well. However, the matter of spacial (i.e. land) borders, which were clear to the historical civilizations, is not a problem of political science alone. There are some differing opinions over this issue in cultural anthropology as well.

Many representatives of cultural anthropology from the West rejected the idea that there were other civilizations in existence besides their own. In their view, there was only one CIVILIZATION (which, of course, was European), and the rest turns out to be “the sphere in which savages are converted into civilized people”. Western missionaries (and ethnographers) derogatorily called indigenous inhabitants “the aborigines”. Earlier this term meant 'inhuman savages'. They were looked down on as part of the animal and floral world of the surrounding territory. But fauna and flora can be seen in two ways: if these are weeds and predators, then they are to be exterminated. If the “aborigines” appear to be useful, then they need to be trained in a way that you could later rule over them. But even then they would not be able to rise to any level higher than “sub-human”.

Many western thinkers were able to point out the falsity of such beliefs in their works. Toynbee (*A Study of History*) states: “It is only one step from treating a person depreciatingly and ruthlessly as an “aborigine” to disgracing their human, personal dignity on the basis of their racial identity. That is the worst possible demonstration of bestiality. First of all, it denies without any evidence that a certain people group has any personal qualities. Second, racial dichotomy of humankind, in contrast to all religious, cultural, political and economic dichotomies, raises an impassable and absolute barrier between human beings. Third, it takes external insignificant and 'primitive' characteristics of human nature as racial criteria.” Thus, racial and cultural imperialism deny that non-Western civilizations have their own cultural-civilizational 'space' and looks at indigenous peoples as a primitive part of a landscape.

The great Russian scholar Lev Gumilev puts an emphasis on the connection between national culture and space on the following bases:

- Ethnic groups are a part of the biosphere. People either change the landscape depending on their needs, or adjust themselves to it. Except those ethnic groups that remain isolated (the relic groups), other groups in the course of cultural movement unite with others to form 'superethnoses' (civilizations). By 'civilization' we mean the reality of national cultures that share one common cultural background. For example, 'Islamic civilization' was able to step outside the boundaries of Arab culture (and incorporate Persian and Turkic culture as well).¹
- Each nation has its own spatial unity, its own Homeland. A person exists in his own biocenosis, relying not so much on the experience of other people as on that of his own forefathers. Change of landscape results in the change of national culture. To Gumilev the view regarding the role of 'the spiritual quest' in human destiny took a leading position.

The Eurasian continent consists of the five following ethno-cultural regions:

1. Monsoon Far East – the area of Confucian and Buddhist civilizations.
2. Arid Great Steppe – the area of nomadic culture.
3. Subtropical Middle East – Islamic world.
4. Wooded Eastern Europe – the center of Orthodox culture.
5. Western Europe – the Catholic (and Protestant) area.

For science, division of cultures by continents is not so significant. For example, even though the Mediterranean Sea divides Europe and Africa, for Hellenic culture it was an inner sea. As a rule, the boundary of the area of civilization is determined by its climatic and arduous borders. In the narrow sense of the term "Eurasia" means 'the Great Plain' from the Carpathian Mountains to China. It consists of three regions: High Asia (Mongolia, Tuva, Altai, the suburbs of Lake Baikal); Central Asia 'proper' and the East European plain (especially Ukraine). Eurasia is not only a geographical notion, it is also an integral cultural domain. Eurasia is populated by autochthonous (homogeneous ethnic) peoples – including the Turks, the Slavs, the Ugro-Finnic group, the Mongols and others – who had adapted to its landscape and climate. None of the non-Eurasian civilizations were able to dominate this area.

The above mentioned cultural space was divided asunder after Slavic peoples had accepted Christianity and the majority of Turkic peoples accepted Islam. After Russia moved to the West and showed its colonial aspirations in respect to other parts of Eurasia, eastern elements gained strength in Turkic civilization.

The correlation of space and culture is also displayed by the contradistinction of the natural environment according to the notions of «ours» and «theirs». This contradistinction is especially evident in the mythological perception of the world. Sh. Ibraev writes: "In myth it appears in a form of division into human and inhuman (albasty, martu, zheztynrak, cast-iron ear, one-eyed giant and others); in classic epics the space is divided accordingly into 'ours' (Nogai, Kipchak, Kazakh and others) and 'that of the enemy' (Kalmyk, Persian, Hindu and others)" (*Epos alemi*. – Almaty, 1993. – p. 137).

The researchers of the epic literature and of other cultural heritages of the Kazakhs define as "theirs" not only the Kalmyks who appeared later, but also the settled empires, such as China, Iran, Rome, Russia and others, who had fought with the nomads since the time immemorial.

Oppositional division of space into "ours" and "theirs" was made not only between larger ethnocultural civilizations but between more distinct cultural and economical types as well. Certainly it would be an exaggeration to say that there is "a never-ending opposition" between settled peoples and nomads. Nevertheless, there is certainly a measure of opposition (of one against the other) which occurs between them. In the world of culture this opposition is depicted in the peculiarities of the landscape. The core of the life of the Kazakh people is the wide steppes and plains. The Great

Steppe is surrounded by the mountain ranges of Altai, Tien-Shan, Ural and Caucasus. The idea that there might be enemies hiding beyond those mountains was deeply rooted in the people's mind.

However, in epic space the understanding of natural obstacles, such as mountains, and steppe boundaries as "theirs" was changeable. It has to do with the above mentioned situational application of the epic space. In epic literature the artistic description of natural landscapes is almost never found, unlike in lyric poetry. Natural landscapes and spatial silhouettes only appear as a part of human actions. The mountain is mentioned when it is being climbed; animals – in hunting, river is mentioned if it is being crossed; steppe – if it is being passed through; the tree – when it is needed for someone to climb or tie a horse to.

There is also another factor that needs to be taken into consideration and that is the difference between epic space and real space. The toponymy of epic or mythological space may not correspond to the present names of regions. Various historical moves, such as the formation of ethnic groups on a certain territory; change of their habitat; invasion of their territory by other ethnic groups and the like are able to radically change the above mentioned opposition of "ours" – "theirs".

It is quite possible to transform high mountains into sacred places for an ethnic group, turn it into a fortress where people can hide from their enemies and muster their strength for defense; cities may be turned into shelters where families of nomads live and where it is possible to find things that are necessary for everyday life. This process is especially typical for medieval Turkic empires. This is what Magzhan (Zhumabeav?) writes about it:

*A mountain of Turan like the Tien-Shan, how can it be?
A great many other mountains cannot compare to Tien-Shan.
As you gaze at (at the great peak) Khan-Tengri
Perhaps you will effortlessly call to mind
Er-turk ascending into the Heavens.*

When interpreting ethnocultural space, a very significant problem concerns the elucidation of whether the peoples who lived in the region were indigenous or foreign peoples. Numerous shifts, migrations, deaths, ousting of various ethnic groups, assimilation processes during times of continuous wars, raids or trading along with debates over border territories in history cause contradictory opinions about ethnocultural space in ethnographical materials. For example, Chinese mentality holds that the territories which previously had been populated by peoples that once were subordinated to China remain the territory of the Heavenly Empire.

The main method of determining the indigenesness of a certain culture within its space is to view the ethnic parts constituting this culture and the encompassing ethnocultural area not as an eternally unchanging monolithic edifice, but as a "living, moving historical phenomenon, comparing it with the historical fate of neighboring nations, and thus elucidating the time of advance of each ethnic group onto its own present territory and (other of) these types of perimeters."²

In order to resolve the problem of indigenous culture and space we need to move from the confines of the single ethnic group to the kinship regions of the larger civilization (or supercivilization) to which it belongs. This is because the majority of modern ethnic groups were formed as a result of shifts, assimilation processes, unification and division. The examples are plentiful. For instance, the peoples of Iran and Northern India were formed as a result of the migration of Aryan groups to the south; the French people were formed because of the migration of Gauls and Franks into the French territory; the Russian people came into existence as a result of incorporating component parts of neighboring Ugro-Finns, Scandinavians and Turks into the ancient Slavonic tribes.

In supercivilizations the spatial borders were determined in a steady form. According to L. Gumilev, every civilization is correlated with a certain landscape. For instance, the Afro-Aziatic Plain is populated by Semitic people; the Eurasian steppes – by Turkic ethnic groups; the wooded plains of Eastern Europe – by the Slavs; the forests of the Far East – by Manchurians, etc.

Let's look at the relationship of space and indigenous culture in the context of Turkic civilizations. This issue still causes many disputes in the history of culture.

Without mentioning the works of Eurocentric western scientists and of historians of Tsarist Russia and the totalitarian Soviet regime, even the most recent publications the cultural space of Turkic peoples and its native origins are often presented in a distorted way. The opinions most often encountered in historical, social and political works are the following:

- The Great Eurasian steppe was populated by the Aryans. In the environment of ancient peoples of Iranian background, the language influence of the Turks who came to this region intensified. The European Indo-Iranian tribes that lived in the Andronian period and did ranching and farming, were forced out by the stock-raising tribes in the Iron Age; by the Sakas on the South and East borders; and by the Sarmatians in the North and the West.
- Altai tribes inhabited Siberia and the territory of today's Northern China between Yenisei and the Pacific Ocean, including prototurkic tribes that lived between Lake Baikal and Ordos. They came to the Eurasian steppes only during "The Great Migration of Peoples".

The above point of view was turned into 'gospel truth' in the official literature as well. However, if one looks at this issue from the outside, it causes a multitude of doubts and questions with respect to seeing Central Asia as an Aryan habitat. First of all, there are no specific evidences that confirm the above opinion. Many proofs were taken from the area of logical error, which claims "this cannot be, because it can never be". In other words, the prototurkic civilization could not exist, and so it did not exist. Secondly, the hypothesis regarding the intimate kinship between Sumer and prototurkic cultures given in Oljas Suleimenov's book "Az i Ya" (which plays off the spelling of 'Asia', or 'Aziya', via Russian) brings to nothing the teaching of (so-called) 'Indo-Iranian' Central Asia. Thirdly, if the prototurkic space was limited by Ordos only, then how could it possibly dominate over the entire Eurasian Great steppe in the beginning of the Middle Ages? To explain it only by the results of the raids would not be true. The Macedonians and (especially the) Mongols, who each had conquered half of the world, were absorbed into the indigenous (Eurasian) population rather quickly. Certainly, this issue requires further clarification.

The territory of Turkic peoples covered much of the area of Asia and Europe. Their habitat consolidated a large territory (about 14-15 million sq. m) from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean. In ancient times this region served as a connection between such civilizations as China, India, Iran and Ancient Greece which all otherwise stood apart one from another.

The inhabited space of the Turkic nations is the only area of civilization of these homogeneous peoples. While it is not limited by the Great Eurasian steppes, it encompasses navigation and oasis centers of human culture formed in ancient times. A billowy relief is more convenient for forming a supercivilization than a monotonous natural landscape. Consequently, distinguishing Turkic peoples solely as plainsmen would mean not taking into consideration the complexity of their cultural space.

The ethnocultural space can expand and enlarge as well as it can decrease and converge. The reasons for this are various. In aggressive wars, a weak culture that is incapable of defending itself can be forced out of its territory, subjected to assimilation or even be entirely destroyed. There is much historical evidence that could be given in support of this (i.e. a carnage of Dzhungars by the Chinese in 18th century; genocides perpetrated by Europeans toward indigenous peoples of both Americas; assimilation of the Celtic tribes, performed by the power of the Roman Empire, etc).

The space of Turkic civilization which was formed from ancient times as one whole unit consisting of a rich, wide territory, was cut off from some of its land since (the beginning of) the modern era by its imperialist neighbors. It is certainly possible to say that this is the reason why the territory of the State of Turkey, that is, the only state from this supercivilization that preserved its independence down to the end of the 20th century, did not maintain its direct connection with the territories of its kindred nations. The (tie) between Siberia and Central Asia, the (common) center of the Volga region the lands of other Turkic peoples, the (connection) between Europe and Asia – these were all tossed asunder as a result of the expansionism of the colonialists of Russia. "Certainly, - writes M. Tatimov, - such an injustice could not last for ever. Justice had triumphed; the Soviet Union that brutally oppressed Turkic people groups, has collapsed; Central Asia and Kazakhstan,

having gained independence, established their own states. Conditions and opportunities have developed for restoration of Turkic unity (through the healing of) broken relations as well as for its development on a level with today's world civilization."³

When talking about mastery of the Great Eurasian steppes, we need to take into consideration the rhythm of ascents and collapses of pan-ethnonational civilizations that surround this particular space. There were numerous historical processes taking place between the civilizations of China, Iran, Russia, western countries and Turkic nations. It was happening not only on the level of cultural interface and dialogue, but consisted of wars and rivalry for this ethnocultural space as well. Owing to its location, Central Asia was placed between the hammer and the anvil. There is no doubt that in the millennia of human history before the advent of fire-arms nomads, who had grown up on horseback, remained the most menacing force to be reckoned with. It would be appropriate to call to mind here A. Weber's teaching about the role of the nomads in history. In his opinion, the nomads played the role of cultural catalysts in the (steppe) space until technological (western) civilization was established. However, A. Weber applies this evaluation only to Indo-European (Aryan) nomads. Here again we observe an example of the disparaging attitude of Eurocentric cultural scholars toward the culture of Turkic Nomads. But concrete history proves that steppe civilizations were one of the primary driving forces of world development.

Thousands of years before our time, the Scythian-Saka civilization, which had close relations with the ancient and oriental civilizations, left some deep traces in the history of their development. The role of the Huns was very special among those who participated in the destruction of the Western Roman Empire. "If the only guarantee of development of human civilization is a mutual exchange of material and spiritual culture," writes A. Tarakty, "then Nomads were the drivers of this historical necessity. It is no accident that up to the present time there are objects of the life and art of Egypt, Greece, Iran, Assyria, Urartu, China, and India which were discovered in the Scythian barrows scattered all over between Altai and the Carpathian Mts. There is no need to resort to archival evidences in order to admit that the first ones who mastered the Great Silk Road that ran through both continents were the horsemen racing the wind and not peasants in China cultivating mulberry trees."⁴

When analyzing cultural space of Turkic ethnic groups it is necessary to pay attention to the following distinctions. **First**, the original culture of the Turks, unlike that of the Arabs, was not formed in the desert, but rather in the wooded Sayan-Altai Plain with its convenient relief. In order to develop the Great Eurasian steppe with its arid climate it was necessary to stockpile reserves in the thick forest of Utuken. The opinion that this region of gathering reserves was the outskirts of China and Iran is far from the truth.

Secondly, another reason for the historical consistency of Turkic ethnocultural integrity has to do with high-grade deposits of copper and iron in Central Asia. Having mastered the skills of metal-working in the times of extreme antiquity, the prototurkic civilization was a powerful force in that region. Some researchers of cultural history point out a similarity between metallurgy of the Sumer people and Siberian ancient armaments (O. Suleimenov, N. Ospanuly, M. Auevov and others).

Thirdly, L. Gumilev points out that in many cases the fate of steppe biocenosis was determined by variability of dryness and humidity.⁵ The alternate coercion of polar and tropical air columns would turn the Eurasian steppe at times into a bare desert and at times into a blossoming field. For example, the Gobi desert used to be a herbaceous steppe, and the territory between the Aral and Caspian Seas was blossoming. We could say that, if the 9th century was humid, then in the 11th century dryness might prevail. The approach of dryness in the Steppe resulted in the weakening of the Turko-Mongols and in the strengthening of their neighbors – the Chinese, Iranians, Slavs and Manchus. For example, in crisis conditions the descendants of the steppemen who conquered China (the majority of whom had Chinese mothers) had lost their nomadic habits. Later on, after China had become stronger, they became like Chinese and the weakened steppe became a dominion of settled civilization. That is to say, the change of a landscape or radical changes in it decreased the ability of the indigenous culture to the make adjustments (adaptations).

There is one conclusion that can be made from the principles which have been stated up to this point. A weighty and relatively stable area of civilization in history should be considered as a unified spatial continuum. When comparing various cultures, as a standard, we need to take the

established ethnonational groups (as whole, integral units) and not (break them down into) their separate component parts.

The violation of the integral homogeneity of naturally formed culture within the framework of (its own cultural) space leads it into a deep crisis. The example of colonization of Eurasia by Russia confirms this. Russian Cossacks fortified their position along the rivers that were a natural barrier to the nomads. Being acquainted with the navigational methods of Scandinavian sailors, the Cossacks managed to skillfully use rivers as channels that connected them with native Russian lands. But for the nomads those rivers were not the means for transport links. While Cossacks learned the skill of mounted combat from the nomads, at the same time they did not give up their boats. As a result, the integrity of nomadic ethnocultural space was violated.

Later, as a result of Stolypin's reforms, the Kazakhs and other nomadic peoples lost their fertile lands. His policies were the basic cause for the transformation of nomadic ethnocultural space into agricultural region. The evaluation of this simultaneously progressive and reactionary process varies in nature with respect to each culture.

Generally it is necessary to evaluate the influence of the (environmental-ecological) space on ethnoculture correctly. There has never been a nation which did not have a Motherland. The entire history (of humanity) is witness to that. Certainly, spatial differences (i.e. landscape, biocenosis, isolation, etc.) had a strong influence on civilization. However, other examples raise doubts about the absolute (nature) of this position. To the point: nomads did not appear in the prairies of North America; or in the pampas of Argentina; or on the pastures of Australia. Consequently, in order to understand civilization in the right way, one needs to take into consideration other factors as well.

¹ On this last point, see esp. Robert L. Canfield, ed., *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press.

² K. A. Pischulin, *Territory*. "Kazakh" Publishers, Almaty, 1994, p. 49.

³ M. Tatimov, *Kazakh alemi*. Almaty, 1993. – p. 82.

⁴ A. Tarakty, *Auyzsha tarikhnama*. "Kazak" Publishers, Almaty, 1993, pp. 32 -33.

⁵ L. Gumilev, *In Search of an Imaginary Kingdom*. Almaty, 1992, p. 18.