

Nomadic Civilization as the Art of Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

“...there is no limit to understanding”

Osip Mandelshtam

*“Conversation about Dante”*

1.

I would like to begin with an explanation of the two key terms presented in the title of this work, namely first ‘nomadic civilization’, and then ‘art of interpretation’.

However self-evident the term “nomadic civilization” seems to be, this phrase nonetheless remains, for a large part of the academic community, no more than, say, a poetic metaphor or political attempt to give comely appearance in some sense to a ‘chaos-ridden and aggressive’ historical community. It has been acknowledged that, after the publication of Professor Nurbulat Masanov’s remarkable monograph entitled “Nomadic Civilization of the Kazakhs”, which appeared in the Russian-language Publishers “Gorizont” [Horizon] in 1995, the justification for an expressly civilized approach to the world and culture of nomads has become significantly easier to establish. But despite this, it would seem that a crucial shift of thought in the general academic conscious, or if you like, subconscious, is still some time away.

The subject matter presented here is not limited to the interrelations between Russia and the nomads of Central Asia. The tragic history of the last half-century – a history of forced assimilation of nomadic culture – has been brought to light in great detail in the scientific literature, so much so that I do not feel the need to dwell on it here today.

Russia's policy of colonization looks like one particular variant of other more common oppositions: West-East, Europe-Asia, field-steppe. The historical and political principles of these dichotomies are fully apparent. But the problem of defining the expanse of the nomadic world is not restricted by these named oppositions. There is also a second vector of research, which is of no less importance, namely, the ability of the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia to determine their own cultural ecumene in relation to other neighboring civilizations, such as China, Persia, or India. This latter topic's relation to the present-day has become acutely apparent in light of the most recent discussions concerning the post-Soviet map of the Eurasian continent – discussions that in a new way connect the geography of *Eurasia*, *Inner Eurasia*, *Inner Asia*, or *Central Asia* (or any one of its incarnations) with the methodology of the humanitarian sciences.

Such terms, and those connected with them, possess various historical connotations, among which one such is the opposition based on political and cultural geography, such as Iran-Turan. This opposition lies along the axis of settled vs. nomadic civilizations. The historical fact that several of the nomadic groups of this region – the Scythians, the Saka, and the Massagetae for example, were of Caucasoid heritage and spoke Indo-Aryan languages, as well as the further Turkification of these populations raises discussion on the question of the evolutionary continuum of the nomadic world's civilizational and cultural development.

In light of this discussion, one of the most fascinating publications to come out in recent years is “Tsentralnaja Azija: opyt istorii dukha” [Central Asia: a History of Spirit], by the Russian scholars Sharif and Rustam Shukurov. The book, which was first put out in French in 1994 by Syros publishers, later appeared in 1996 in Russian through Panorama publishers. Intense and passionate, this book, which was written with all the pain and bitterness so well known to victims of the Soviet regime, is primarily devoted to the conflict arising from the confrontation between Turkic and Persian civilizations. The authors maintain that ‘conflict is possible even among peoples of the same religious community. The reason for such conflict lies in the values of the ethno-cultural plan’ (p. 5). The enthusiasm for the revival of Tajik culture is connected with a whole host of controversial overstatements, according to the authors, and in this they are not alone. In post-Soviet publications of the last decade there has arisen an almost unique genre of polemic distortions. However, if this book had been written from the primitive perspective of ‘us’ (one of the selected nations) vs. ‘them’ (our enemies), it would not have been worth even mentioning here. My attention was attracted by the fundamental posing of the question. In examining the history of Central Asia, the authors shed light upon the great Persian civilization and divide all Iranians into either Western (Iran proper) or Eastern (Turan). Iran and Turan, these, *aristocrats of spirit*, as the authors call them, appear as if they are competing in a joust. The Shukurovs date the start of the flourishing Persian Empire’s collapse with the appearance of the first Turk in this territory. Beginning in the eleventh century in Eurasia the huge and hideous mass of the Turkic world forms, according to the formulations of the authors ‘a world with another relationship towards existence, a different mentality’, -- ‘an aggressive

barbarous world, which does not accept foreign values' (p. 25). 'The events of the thirteenth century, connected with the Mongol invasion are', according to the authors, 'a crucial stage in the fundamental change of the ethnic balance, in the de-Iranization, nomadization, and Turkification of Central Asia' (p. 36-37). Considering the Mongols as only a 'battering ram' and 'conveyance' allowing the Turks to occupy Central Asia, the authors draw a frightening picture of a truly natural calamity. 'The vast expanses, which were formerly cultivated and densely populated, in the course of several years turned into a lifeless wasteland. The Mongols either annihilated or lead into slavery entire populations of practically all the major cities ... masses of nomads streamed into the unpopulated regions...' (p. 37), and further: 'With the beginning of Turkic mass migrations the sole weapon of the autochthonous Iranian population, the last remaining means of its survival was its culture... The Tajik opposed the force of the sword with his *kalam* (reed pen), and battle formation with his refinement and structurization of thought' (p. 38). The authors of the book advance the concept of 'basic Tajik spiritual imperialism', seeing in it the foundation of the 'supremacy of Tajik civilization' (p. 39). For the concepts 'Proto-Indo-Europeans' and 'nomads' they substitute historically different concepts – 'Tajiks' and 'Turks', and thus easily arrive at the conclusion that contemporary Tajiks purportedly show themselves to be the 'perpetuation of Indo-European culture, a small island enduring over the course of a thousand years in a dynamic ethno-political sea of Turks' (p. 40). The Shukurovs go on to state that, 'any event of contemporary life ... proves to be a logical continuation of some paradigm of ethno-cultural behavior, set by nature herself' (p. 40). These two facets of world construct – the spiritual-intellectual and the politicized, which can be read, according to their

sources, as civilized and barbaric, in other words, Indo-European (read Tajik) and Turkic, seem to exist in the region even today. In any event, the nomads of Central Asia of the last millennium have been depicted beyond the bounds of the civilized (and according to the authors, exclusively Indo-European) ecumene.

The fundamental research of Nurbulat Masanov, which came to light at virtually the same time as Sharif and Rustam Shukurovs' book, helps to return to a historically objective understanding of this continuum of steppe nomadism, as well as the co-existence of the two Central Asian civilizations, settled and nomadic.

Scholars in Kazakhstan have taken the priority of philosophical interpretation in the history and theory of nomadism. A starting point and basis for creating the contemporary concept is the book "Kochevniki: Estetika: Poznanie mira traditsionnym kazakhskim iskusstvom" [Nomads: Aesthetics: Understanding the World through Traditional Kazakh Art] – the result of devoted research by Murat Auezov, Mirlan Karataev, and other Kazakh philosophers and cultural historians of the 1960's. The first edition of the book was confiscated and destroyed; the second edition only came out in 1993. Despite the censorship obstacles and "ideological smokescreens" of Soviet times, the contemporary Kazakh level of cultural self-consciousness, together with the reawakening of their ethnic self-consciousness, ultimately allows a discussion on the ideological model of nomadic civilization and fundamental conceptual categories of nomadism. The explosion of publications by Kazakh philosophers, historians, ethnographers, and musicologists in the last decade is evidence of the qualitatively new stage in the study of the ideological nature of nomads. It is becoming clearer that in each of the basic universal concepts of humanity, such as nature and culture,

space and time, mythology and history, way of life and existence, nomads produce their own unique contributions. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the nomad's picture of the world is still not admitted by the usual understanding, formed on Eurocentric concepts of civilization. This shortcoming can be explained not only historically, but also, so to speak, ontologically.

Please understand me correctly; I am interested not in the political aspects of the problem, but in the ideological, cultural, and aesthetic. If, for example, we follow the renowned French authors Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari, by defining nomad civilization as a 'war machine'<sup>2</sup>, then we see one picture. If, however, we follow the Kazakh paradigm of the philosophical relationship towards life, then that same civilization will be perceived and interpreted in a completely different fashion. But this situation leads us to the second of the key concepts expressed in the title of this paper, that of the "art of interpretation".

## 2.

By deliberately simplifying to the most extreme, it is possible to reduce the scientific analysis of the Eurocentric paradigm to an investigation of the final cultural product, a petrified artifact with the stress on its reproducibility and circulation. Such a product should be prepared for foreign consumption, that is, it should occupy a place in some virtual culture marketplace. Standards for consumption have already been historically set, for Europe this means, relatively speaking, the great masterpieces of ancient Greek civilization, whereas for Central Asia, luxury items transported along the

Great Silk Road. Everything, which does not correspond to these standards, is either spurned, or stagnates in the shadow and stillness of museums.

It stands to reason that nomads have their artistic masterpieces, which are found in accordance with the cultural standards of the European concepts of art, but not limited by them. Nomad art possesses one other coordinate, which in general terms I shall call procedure. We deal here not so much (and in many instances not at all) with the end product as with the process of creation, in which **all** its components are engaged. But what does this mean?

Let me explain by giving as an example a game. Most are familiar with the boisterous Russian slapping game, a version of which is known in English as *pattycake*. In the course of this game two players periodically come into contact with the palms of either one or both of their hands, alternating these slaps with improvisational contact on various parts of the body. Now imagine this same game being carried out, where one player periodically brings forward one or both of his hand to slap his opponent's, but there is no opponent, his slaps being directed as if in plain air. A comic, if not tragi-comic impression arises. The game vanishes not only as a happenstance act of creativity, but it also ceases to exist as a 'work' and as a kind of 'image'.

What I mean in speaking about the process of co-creation inherent in nomads is that, not only is the work itself treated as a process (this aspect was quite well revealed by Boris V. Asaf'yev in his book "Muzykal'naja forma kak protsess" [Musical Form as Process]), but the perception of the work is treated as an act of cultural co-creativity.

It stands to reason that a certain part of oral culture, on which nomad art is to a considerable degree based, is interpreted by all as artwork. However, in order to comprehend the entire depth of its civilization this one type of

interpretation is insufficient. The active perception of the dialogic type (in the Bakhtinian sense) is also insufficient. Since it is not deciphered by you personally, the epistle of the nomad in all its depth and fascination disappears, just as any exotic characters which have yet to be deciphered by us disappear with regard to whatever information they might contain. Beyond the borders of their own culture the nomad's work of art is practically unusable as a product. In any event, some general approach must be found in order to understand it.

The significance of Asiya I. Mukhambetova's works lies, in particular, in the fact that she has revealed in the syncretism of the Kazakh instrumental melody, or *kuy*, its verbal component. Realizing the significance of the legend for understanding the composition of the *kuy* was the first step in grasping the unique character of the nomad's perception.

The fondest desire of Kazakh ethnomusicology, which has taken up the idea of verbal-musical syncretism in the *kuy*, could ultimately become the reconstruction of each legend of every single *kuy*. However, this desire turns out to be, as can be readily ascertained, the same one for the contemporary final product. It is therefore necessary to proceed further and take the following decisive step toward grasping the essence of nomad culture, which occupies a pivotal spot in the civilization of nomads.

To make the proposed approach clearer let us turn to some other of its phenomena. The cornerstone of historical knowledge of nomads, their genealogies, strike one by their variety and diversity. If one takes the position of scientific Puritanism, then the fact that genealogies are constantly transforming, even within the bounds of closed societies, can provoke only bewilderment. How curious, too, that included in these genealogies are facts from historical sources of the modern era, or entire peoples, earlier unknown

to the informant. But for nomads as a “nation of genealogies” this is not nonsense, but a great implication. Romantics from the European school of history always dream of finding a single true, most complete, and logically sequential genealogy, which, in the capacity of a final product, would be digestible from the position of its European paradigm. But even here nomads bring to it several disappointments. The same can be said about all other genres of nomadic arts, including epic and lyric genres. The text is never equal to itself, and it would be methodologically incorrect to look for a uniquely true sense of it.

Let us now make a sharp transition into the sphere of fine arts, in particular, into the realm of traditional ornamental design. The “loss” of a complete “register” or “lexicon” of ornamental design is undoubtedly understood by the world scientific community. Very likely the majority of contemporary ethnographers believe in the “golden age” of a full and exhaustive language of symbols. The greatest confusion is caused by the abundance of various interpretations for the same ornamental element, or different manifestations arising from a single folk pattern term. But a more intent and, if you will, systematic study of ornamental design reveals, in my view, one of the cardinal distinctions of nomad thinking -- its suppleness and polysemanticism in its interpretative abilities. In this way, a triangular-shaped figure can be read in various contexts as “fish”, “the tip of an arrow”, or “bird’s beak”. Meanwhile, such ostensibly heterogeneous readings represent, in the final analysis, a complete picture of three mythological worlds: the Lower (fish), the Middle (arrowhead), and the Upper (bird’s beak). The rhombus, as a combination of two triangles (one with tip pointing up, representing the male aspect, the other with the tip pointing down, representing the female aspect) represents unity and union. The endless

variety of “double ram’s horns”, very likely one of the sole ornamental elements, which can be determined with confidence, develops into the “Tree of the World” (when strung together on a vertical axis), and forms “solar rosettes” (when combined in cruciform fashion).

In short, attempts to determine meaning in a strict sense, so to say as a unity of opinion, is radically alien to nomadic ideology. For example, in the variety of genealogies we observe their traditional strength, inasmuch as they are processes of discussion, that their interpretations are more important than the “final product” formed as a unified text. The genealogy reflects the formation of historical knowledge as a process, and its interpretation includes the individual in an endless stream of history, the goal of which is the quest for meaning. And this goal is achieved by oral history, perhaps with greater success, at least for the consciousness of the society, than written history, which is constantly written and rewritten in a variety of languages and with various ideological goals in mind. Maintaining everything that has been said, we step as if into another world, a world not of finished products, but of perceptions and interpretations. The forcible extraction of an object of nomadic culture from the context of its interpretation deprives it at least by half of its meaning or alters it altogether.

I shall never forget, when in a conversation I had with an internationally renowned musicologist, to my question of why the Kazakh *kuy* has never achieved the popularity in the world as say, the Indian *raga*, he answered that the reason for this lay in the monotony and singularity of form of Kazakh instrumental music. “Nothing is going on in it”, he explained. He couldn’t have said anything more unexpected for me. But I am grateful to him, since his answer allowed me to understand the position of the listener, oriented to the end product, instead of invited to the process of its

manufacture, development, and arrangement. I thought to myself, wouldn't this be the same as someone coming to a restaurant for a meat dish, only to be taken first to the pasture in order to raise the future, if you will, "meal". Even a highly trained consumer needs at least a recipe, an precisely described process and technique for preparing the dish. In the case of great insistency he may even obtain the recipe, but he will still end up disappointed, since the final product will nonetheless be inedible for him.

I think, however, that the problem does not lie solely in the virtual culture marketplace. The marketplace is something that will come with time and be directly linked to the costly machine of mass propaganda. (This theme deserves separate attention). The problem, I believe, lies in the fact that the historically formed paradigm of scientific cognition denies any possibility of active co-creativity on the part of the perceiver<sup>3</sup>, and that is why the nomadic world as a civilized phenomenon is not ready for recognition. And interpretation, being a part of the very objective of nomad art, is its flesh, air, and water, that is, not only its context, but its very life-blood.

For nomad arts the categories of text - context are insufficient, what are needed are the categories of text - interpretation. Meaning is saturated with interpretation and lives because of it. Art without interpretation is just background noise. It is interpretation that makes, for example, musical form polysemantic, and such polysemanticism is an indication of the life of the form. If you don't want to insert the meaning, then just don't listen to it. The meaning comes to life, it materializes again and again in the processes of interpretation. Interpretation constitutes a personal channel to that host of eternal questions and constants of life, which slumber in ordinary time, but need art in order to awaken.

The conscious activity of interpretation and freedom within the framework of the laws of traditional art presupposes, for both the creator and the perceiver, equivalent baggage of knowledge and experiences and requires command of a single co-creationary code. Perhaps more important to an even greater degree is the fundamental tenet that interpretation reveals layers of meanings and values unknown to the creator, and creates associations and connections with the most unexpected occurrences in history, myth, and everyday and spiritual life. Thanks to the activity of interpretation, art is saturated with real-life meanings. From this point of view interpretation is completely legitimate within the fabric of tradition.

The mechanism of interpretation makes explainable, in my regard, certain events within contemporary pop-culture of nomadic peoples. I mean such instances when those forms of musical activity, which may be completely inauthentic, and at first glance far from the traditional art form, or even hostile to it, are included as ethnic markers within the consciousness of its enthusiasts. In this situation the unifying factor is language; all that, for example, sounds Kazakh, will be Kazakh.

Of course, after all is said and done , there stands not only the specific nature of nomad culture as such, but also the specific methodology. The essence of this methodology can be reduced to one simple claim, namely that, before undertaking any reconstruction or formulating any inherent rules concerning traditional culture, one should strive to fix in succession those interpretations, which circulate in the sphere of tradition. This method, it seems to me, can be derived from the synchronic linguistic postulate of Ferdinand de Saussure. It was this method which was successfully applied by Petr Bogatyrev in his study of the magical rites and beliefs of Ruthenians living in Subcarpathian Rus<sup>4</sup>. This fixing of interpretations should take its

rightful place in both the study and representation of art among nomadic peoples.

### 3.

To conclude, allow me to elucidate all of this gradually through the following.

Generally speaking, interpretation accompanies every phenomenon of culture and every work of art as a sort of “companion”, or “shadow”. One can say that art lives only so long as its interpretations, be they performance-oriented or verbal, exist.

It is appropriate here to distinguish two basic types of interpretations: one from **outside** the culture, i.e. interpretations in the genres of art history, musicology, literary criticism, and such, where the creative work and the interpretation are in principle divided; and the second type from **within** the culture, i.e. interpretations included in the very existence of art, where creation, performance, and interpretation are in principle not divisible, where interpretation is a part of the very “fabric” of the culture.

The first type of interpretation<sup>5</sup> is widely known; it has given rise to the entire science of *hermeneutics*. The second type, however, is little known, and rarely attracts the attention of historians or cultural theoreticians. Meanwhile its significance seems to me to be paramount. In this same regard I also think it’s possible to distinguish between two basic types of cultures, where I have combined into one of them those cultures, for which self-interpretation plays not a marginal, but a fundamental role.

According to my observations, nomadic cultures are what should be attributed to that type, for which the art of interpretation is a determining

factor. I mean such a culture or civilization which is characterized by the interweaving of interpretation into the very life of the culture without the necessary intervention of any art critics.

When the scholar Boris V. Asaf'yev formulated the three-way correlation “composer-performer-listener” for the field of European music, he showed that for oral traditions these three functions can coincide. Today, when taking under consideration art of the nomadic world, I propose adding a fourth category, a fourth function: “interpreter”. For this category two conditions are essential: (1) the culture lives in interpretations, and (2) these interpretations are in principle not tautological.

Today it would not be out of order to propose, if only in working format, a classification of the types of interpretations. I believe that there are five basic types, which I have formulated in connection to the field of music.

1. **Situational interpretation.** The musical work can be introduced or inserted into an act of exchange (musing) by analogy with, and upon completion of the performance; it can be a retort, commentary, or argument in a specific situation.
2. **Philosophical interpretation.** The same *kuy* (melody), or the same *terme* (poetry in music form) can become a retort or argument in the course of a conversation on the topic of life and death, good and evil, youth and old age, etc. As a result this work begins to luminesce through its many facets, and begins to manifest its new cognitive possibilities.
3. **Contestional interpretation.** The same work sounds, in the context of a competition (such as the Kazakh *ajtys*, *tartys*), like an act moving towards a victory. The comparative characteristics of the work here come to the forefront.

4. **Historical interpretation.** In the course of discussing genealogies the work sounds like a retort or argument.
5. **Aesthetic interpretation.** In the course of creating beauty and harmony out of chaos, or delighting in beauty and harmony, the music sounds like an argument or “manifestation”.

It is not out of the question that tradition knows of other types of interpretation. But in any event a work does not exist outside of active interpretation, and this general aesthetic category acquires an absolutely particular meaning within the realm of nomadic civilization. If **you** personally are not included in the process of performance as co-creation, then you are not hearing a product of this process. Nomad art is not simply the address, it is itself the letter, which is impossible to hear unless the envelope is opened by you in the course of **your** existence. You have to realize that this letter is addressed to you personally, and that without it you are an orphan in the world. The music of the nomadic world reveals in you the philosopher, and it is in this sense that it is a philosophical art.

No one need dress up like a nomad, nor rather, sit on his horse, but to hear a story, to sense inside yourself the ingrained concept of steppe time and space, which, if you are an outsider, you may not perceive, but which lives inside you latently like a slumbering memory of all humankind. And if you find yourself drawn into one of the five enumerated types of interpretation, then you are now a part of the culture. You are now inside nomadic civilization; you are a participant in the continual dialog of cultures; you are a part of the never-ending flow of interpretations. You reveal in yourself a personality unknown to you, and having perceived this discovery, you accept nomadism. You accept it not as the notorious ‘war machine’, but as a unique philosophical-spiritual mode of existence.

I insist on a connection between these two concepts – civilization and interpretation, because without the acknowledgement that the nomadic world is one of the greatest civilizations known to man, the art of nomads will never be perceived as Art, on the same level as masterpieces of the world's classics. The unique feature of this civilization lies in the fact that it is not a civilization of the Book, it is not a civilization of the Temple, it is not a civilization of the Palace Orchestra, rather, it is a civilization of Interpretation. It is meant for the Word as component of all arts, for your comprehending word.

And for nomads who are today reawakening to a new life the realization of their timeless right to interpretation lies ahead. At this time in the entire world, and for the entire world, it is necessary to develop and perfect a particular genre of translation, which I am calling in the course of my work “cultural translation”. This is rather a type of re-creation in search of categories adequate for any culture.

Thus, the unique character of nomadic civilization seems to me like a constantly realizable, constantly and multi-variously “textualized” interpretation. As I have attempted to show, this phenomenon is uncovered under the condition that the “listener”, at the moment of hearing while taking part in the process of animating entire layers of history and culture, is capable of attaching himself to the procedure of interpretation, so as to find in himself that, which is common to all mankind, and which has been laid down in nomadic civilization.

This is not an art-study or musicological interpretation in the general sense of the word, it is rather a case of spiritual self-realization, a case of that great spiritual working, which nomadic civilization constantly engenders in

each one who accepts it as Civilization, as a civilization of spirituality with significance for all mankind.

Nomads remind me of Socrates, who, as the story goes, was once invited to a rich man's palace. There he, a barefoot philosopher, discovered with astonishment, how many things there are in the world without which he can so easily manage.

But the world cannot manage without Socrates.

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<sup>1</sup> Text of a paper presented at the International colloquium "Iskusstvo Kochevnikov Tsentral'noj Azii: Vremja i Prostranstvo, Zvuki i Formy" [Art of the Nomads of Central Asia; Time and Space, Sound and Form] (Almaty, June 2001, in Russian). The short version of this paper was delivered by the author in April 2002 in English at the conference "Sound Travels: A Musical Journey Along the Silk Roads" (University of California at Berkeley, Cal Performances, p. 60-62) and reproduced here separately. This full version of this text has been published in Russian as "Kochevaia tsivilizatsiia kak iskusstvo interpretatsii," *Muzykal'naia Akademiia* (Moscow, 2006), no. 1. S. 10—15 and translated by Walter Slater.

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia" by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; French original: "Milles Plateaux", published in Paris in 1980; English translation – in Minneapolis in 1987. Chapter 12 has the distinctive title: "1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine". On this theme Gilles Deleuze has published a separate book: "Nomadology: The War Machine" (New York: Semiotext, 1986) – I am familiar with the English translation of the French original.

<sup>3</sup> I, of course, am not talking here about computer intertextuality, regarding a principally different level of contemporary technology.

<sup>4</sup> The first edition of P.G. Bogatyrev's book first appeared in French in 1929: "Les actes magiques, rites, et croyances en Russie subcarpathique" (Paris: Honore Champion), and was translated into Russian in 1971: "Magicheskie dejstvija, obrjady i verovanija Zakarpat'ja", in Bogatyrev's book: "Voprosy teorii narodnogo iskusstva" (M.: Iskusstvo, pp. 167-296), and into English in 1998: "Vampires in the Carpathians: Magical Acts, Rites, and Beliefs in Subcarpathian Rus" (New York: Columbia University).

<sup>5</sup> Or *exegesis*, according to A.N. Veselovskij (*Istoricheskaia poetika* [Historical Poetics]. Leningrad, 1940).

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