

Nomadic Civilization as the Art of Interpretation

I would like to begin with an explanation of the two key terms presented in the title of my paper, namely ‘nomadic civilization,’ and “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 dignify a historical community that is popularly considered to have been “chaos-ridden and aggressive.” The publication of Nurbulat Masanov’s remarkable monograph¹ offered critical support for an expressly civilized approach to understanding nomadic culture and society, but nonetheless it would seem that a crucial shift of thought in academic consciousness, or subconsciousness, is still some time away.

Nomadic civilization

The tragic history of Inner Asian nomadism in the last century – a history of forced assimilation and sedenterization at the behest of Russian, and later Soviet and Chinese imperial power – has been brought to light in such great detail that I do not feel the need to dwell on it here today.

Russian and Soviet colonial policies toward nomadic peoples reflected familiar historical and geographical oppositions: West and East, Europe and Asia, Iran and Turan. The civilized world was rooted in the West, in European and Iranian culture and agriculture. Nomads, the descendents of barbarians, represented Asia, Turan, the uncivilized world of the steppe.

In fact the problem of defining the nomadic world is not limited to the superficiality of such oppositions. From the nomadic perspective, the defining issue is the ability of the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia to determine their own cultural priorities irrespective of other neighboring civilizations, such as China, Persia, and India. The importance of this independence to present-day geopolitics has become acutely apparent in light of recent discussions about the post-Soviet geography of *Inner Eurasia*, *Inner Asia*, or *Central Asia* – as the central portions of the Eurasian continent is called.

In light of these historical oppositions, one of the most fascinating publications on the topic to come out in recent years is *Central Asia: The Experience of Spiritual History*, by Russian scholars Sharif and Rustam Shukurov. The book first appeared in French in 1994 and was published in Russian in 1996.² Intense and passionate, this book, 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, i.e., between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The reason for such conflict lies in ethnic and cultural values. The authors reflect an enthusiasm for the revival of Tajik culture as a part of Persian civilizations, and in this they are not alone. The authors suggest that the dichotomy between the Indo-European (read Tajik) and the Turk exists in the region even today. In any event, Central Asian nomads of the last millennium have been depicted as living beyond the bounds of the civilized, and according to the authors exclusively Indo-European, world.

By contrast, the fundamental research of Nurbulat Masanov, which came to light at virtually the same time as Sharif and Rustam Shukurovs' book, supports a more historically

objective understanding of steppe nomadism, as of the abiding co-existence of the two Central Asian civilizations, settled and nomadic.

Please understand me correctly, I am interested not in the political aspects of the problem, but in its ideological, cultural, and aesthetic ramifications. If, for example, we follow the renowned French scholars Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and define nomad civilization as a “war machine,”³ then we see one picture. If, however, we follow the Kazakh paradigm that views nomadism as a particular philosophical relationship to 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: the “art of interpretation.”

The art of interpretation

European civilization has long placed a high value on artifacts, beginning with the great artistic masterpieces of ancient Greek civilization and the luxury items transported to Europe along the Silk Road from the East.

Nomads also have their artistic masterpieces. Some of them reflect European concepts of art, but others do not. Nomad art is less oriented toward products than toward the process itself, or, particularly, toward the act of co-creation. But what does this mean?

Let me explain by using a game as an example. Most are familiar with the boisterous children’s slapping game, a version of which is known in English as *patty-cake*. In the course of this game two players periodically slap each others’ palms, alternating these slaps with improvisational contact on various parts of the body. Now imagine this same game being carried out so that one player periodically brings forward one or both of his hands to slap his opponent’s,

but there is no opponent, his slaps are directed simply at the empty air. A comic, if not tragi-comic impression arises.

A certain part of oral culture, on which nomad art is based to a considerable degree, is interpreted by all as artwork. However, in order to comprehend the entire depth of nomadic civilization, artistic interpretation alone is insufficient. If it is not deciphered by you personally, the epistle of the nomad in all its depth and fascination disappears. Beyond the borders of nomad 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. If we would listen to CD *"Kazakh Traditional Music, vol. 3. Kazakh Instrumental Music," Almaty, 2001, no. 1: "Aqsaq qulan,"* and compare it with other recordings of the same piece whose performers have in mind another legends, we should clearly hear the following. In two performers' versions, the same Kazakh instrumental composition, or *kuy*, sounds different depending on two different legends associated with this programmatic piece in the oral tradition.

To make this approach clearer let us turn to some other phenomena. The cornerstone of historical knowledge of nomads – their genealogies – are striking for their variety and diversity. Included in these genealogies are facts from modern historical sources, sometimes about entire peoples, previously unknown to the listener. But for nomads who are a “nation of genealogies,” juggling one's origin is not nonsense, but has great implications for one's sense of self-identity and worldview. Romantics from the European school of history always dream of finding a single true, complete, and logically sequential genealogy, which, as a final product, would conform to its European paradigm. But even here nomads present several disappointments. The text is never limited just to itself, and it would be methodologically incorrect to look for a unique truth in it. The same can be said about all other genres of nomadic arts, including epic and lyric genres.

Let us now make a sharp transition into the sphere of fine art, in particular, into the realm of traditional ornamental design. Great confusion is caused both by an abundance of interpretations of one and the same ornamental element, and by the different visual referents arising from a one and the same term. Yet a more systematic study of ornamental design reveals one of the cardinal distinctions of nomad thinking – its suppleness and polysemy in its interpretative abilities. In this way, a triangular-shaped figure can be read in various contexts as a fish, the tip of an arrow, or a bird's beak. At the same time, such ostensibly heterogeneous readings represent a complete picture of three mythological worlds: the Lower (fish), the Middle (arrowhead), and the Upper (bird's beak). The rhombus, 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 only ornamental elements that can be determined with confidence, develops into the Tree of Life when strung together on a vertical axis, and forms solar rosettes when combined in cruciform fashion.

In short, an attempt to determine precise meaning is radically alien to nomadic ideology. As in the case of genealogies, their traditional strength is that they are processes of discussion and their interpretations are more important than any unified final product. Genealogy reflects the formation of historical knowledge as a process, and its interpretation includes the individual in an endless stream of history and in the quest for meaning. This goal is achieved by oral history perhaps with greater success, at least for social consciousness, than written history, which is constantly written and rewritten in a variety of languages and with various ideological goals in mind. In nomad art, we step 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 of at least half its meaning or alters it altogether.

I shall never forget a conversation I had with an internationally renowned musicologist. We were discussing *kuy*, the quintessential form of Kazakh instrumental music. When I asked why the Kazakh *kuy* has never achieved the world popularity of 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 who is oriented toward an end product, instead of understanding that he is invited to witness the process of its manufacture, development, and arrangement. I thought to myself, wouldn’t this be the same as – let us imagine for a moment – someone coming to a restaurant for a meat dish, only to be taken first to the pasture in order to raise the “meal,” then to slaughter a sheep, to enjoy it, and so on. Even a highly trained consumer needs at least a recipe, an precisely described process and technique for preparing the dish, to know how to begin to appreciate the unfamiliar meal before him. In other words, a European begins with a bite – the very moment where the nomad ends.

The problem, I believe, lies in the fact that the reigning paradigm of cognition denies the perceiver any possibility of active co-creativity. This is why the nomadic world cannot be recognized as a civilized phenomenon. 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.⁴

For nomad arts the categories of text and context are insufficient. We need the categories of text and 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, music polysemous, and such polysemy is an indication of the degree to which music is alive. If you don’t want to insert meaning, then just don’t listen to music. Meaning comes to life as it materializes

again and again in the processes of interpretation. Interpretation constitutes a personal channel to that host of eternal questions and the constants of life which slumber in ordinary time, and need art in order to awaken.

Interpreting traditional art presupposes, for both the creator and the perceiver, a shared background of knowledge and experience and command of a single co-creationary code. Interpretation reveals layers of meanings and values unknown to the creator, and it creates associations and connections with the most unexpected occurrences in history, myth, and everyday life. Thanks to interpretation, art is saturated with real-life meanings.

Therefore, before undertaking any reconstruction or formulating any inherent rules about traditional culture, one should strive to understand those interpretations which circulate in the sphere of tradition.

Conclusion

To conclude, allow me to elucidate all of this gradually. Generally speaking, interpretation accompanies every phenomenon of traditional nomadic culture and every work of nomadic 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 between two basic types of interpretations: one which stems from outside of art itself, i.e. interpretations of art history, musicology, literary criticism, and such, where the creative work and the interpretation are in principle divided; and the second type that comes from within art, i.e., interpretations included in the very existence of art, where creation, performance, and interpretation are in principle not divisible, where interpretation is in the very “fabric” of the art.

The first type of interpretation is widely known; it has given rise to the entire science of meaning. The second type, however, is little known, and rarely attracts the attention of historians or cultural theoreticians. To me, however, its significance seems paramount. These two types of interpretation correspond to two different types of culture.

According to my observations, the art of interpretation is a fundamental aspect of nomadic cultures. A work does not exist outside of active interpretation, and this general aesthetic category acquires an absolutely specific meaning within the realm of nomadic civilization.

Certainly, this needs to be grounded in specific examples to work, but in the short time we have today, I would like to underline a general approach. If you personally are not included in the process of performance as co-creator, 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 you yourself open the envelope 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 you as a philosopher, and it is in this sense that it is a philosophical art.

I insist on a connection between these two concepts – civilization and interpretation – because without the acknowledgment 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 means that the Word is component of all arts, *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 call “cultural translation.” This is 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, in music this phenomenon is uncovered when “listeners,” at the moment of hearing and while taking part in the process of animating entire layers of history and culture, are capable of attaching themselves to the procedure of interpretation, in order to find 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 that he could easily manage without.

But the world cannot manage without Socrates.

¹ Nurbulat Masanov. *Kochevaia tsivilizatsiia kazakhov* ("Nomadic Civilization of the Kazakhs"). Almaty: Sotsinvest, Moscow: Gorizont, 1995.

² Shukurov Sharif, Shukurov Rustam. *Tsentral'naia Aziia (Opyt istorii dukha)* [Central Asia: A History of Spirit]. Moscow: Informatsionno-ekspertnaia gruppа Panorama, 1996.

³ Gilles Deleuze. *Nomadology: The War Machine*. New York: Semiotext, 1986. See also chapter 12 ("1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine") in the book of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia." Minneapolis, 1987.

⁴ Compare some basic ideas in the book *The Reader in the Text*, ed. by Susan R. Suleiman and Inse Crosman. Princeton University Press, 1980.

Note:

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