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NOMADS AND NETWORKS

The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan



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The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan

Edited by Sören Stark and Karen S. Rubinson with Zainolla S. Samashev and Jennifer Y. Chi

Including contributions by Nursan Alimbai, Nikolay A. Bokovenko,
Claudia Chang, Bryan K. Hanks, Sagynbay Myrgabayev, Karen S. Rubinson,
Zainolla S. Samashev, Sören Stark, and Abdesht T. Toleubaev

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SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF THE NOMADS OF CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH TIME

Nursan Alimbai

ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS AND THE SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS OF MOBILE PASTORALISTS

The territory of Kazakhstan encompasses an area of 2,725,000 square kilometers, extending in latitude from north 40° to 50° and in longitude from east 46° to 87°, and occupies one of the innermost regions of the Eurasian continent. Its resources for the organization of agriculture are constrained by a very harsh climate and limited precipitation.

Therefore, practically all the territory of Kazakhstan belongs to the zone of high-risk farming, and only advances made by modern agro-technology have allowed substantial production capabilities. The ecological structure of Kazakhstan is composed principally of steppe, desert, and semi-desert zones; these zones host limited plant cover and water resources with average annual precipitation of less than 350 millimeters per year and a largely continental climate. The dominant landscape and climatic characteristics of the region are determined by the territory's vast distance from the world's oceans and seas. In these climatic conditions, nomadism was the most rational—and, in many parts of Kazakhstan, the only possible—method of exploiting the natural resources necessary to support life in the preindustrial era.¹



9-1 Old Turkic stirrups. Iron, Western Kazakhstan, chance find 1909, 6th–8th century CE.

9-2 Old Turkic stirrups. Iron, Western Kazakhstan, chance find 1909, 6th–8th century CE.

The beginning of the formation of the nomadic social structure dates to the final phase of the Bronze Age, from roughly the twelfth to the tenth century BCE. The huge territory of Kazakhstan, with its particular geoeological conditions, was an important area in the spread of nomadism in Central Asia. The development of nomadism within its fundamental parameters—sociocultural, economic, political, ideological, institutional—required the emergence of adequate social relations within the nomadic sphere as well as a corresponding life-supporting system. The features of this system developed through time; a crucial period was the Old Turkic Period (sixth–eighth century CE) when many of these features took their “classical” shape.² Unfortunately, many questions concerning social relations in nomadic societies during the Old Turkic period are still far from being solved, although these questions are highly relevant for the study of the genesis and evolution of nomadic societies in time and space. Nevertheless, on the basis of historical analogy and comparative ethnographic parallels, it is possible to conclude, with some level of certainty, that precisely during this period nomadism in the large area of the Great Steppe Belt entered its classic phase of development.

Judging from medieval literature and archaeological discoveries of the last century, it was during the Old Turkic Period that a more advanced subsistence system was formed, one that represented optimal sociocultural and technological adaptation to the harsh conditions of the nomadic environment. Many of its features appeared much earlier than mobile pastoralism in the Eurasian steppes, while other features—including specific elements of armament, riding equipment (including functionally important elements of horse tack such as stirrups and the hard saddle), and the collapsible lattice yurt with felt cover—were further perfected throughout the subsequent history of mobile pastoralists in the steppes of present-day Kazakhstan (figs. 9-1–9-7). These and other inventions (for example, multiple methods for the production of cultured milk products) have had universal impact.³

In the process of the development of subsistence forms, social relations with specific norms, principles, and institutions also formed within the nomadic sphere. These norms and institutions thoroughly shaped the community of mobile pastoralists.⁴

A clear distinction between social and technological features does not conform with historical reality. Social relations among members of a community have always been vital for the proper function of structural components of subsistence systems, such as settlements, dwellings, furniture, clothing, food, and various kinds of folk knowledge. There is a clear interdependence between a communal type of social relations adapted to the environment and forms of pastoral subsistence, resulting in mobile forms of community. Only a communal form of social relations, developed over centuries as a sociocultural mode of nomadic self-organization under harsh ecological conditions, corresponds to the nomadic type of life-supporting system. In its turn, the communal nature of nomadic society required from the beginning a mobile life-supporting system, highly adapted to specific environmental conditions. Thus, in many ways a balanced view of both social and technological developments explains the effectiveness of nomadic societies in the exploitation of natural resources. To understand processes and key elements of the social history of the Eurasian Great Steppe Belt, in my opinion it is essential to take a closer look at traditional features of social relations in nomadic communities.⁵

Interesting parallels are provided by traditional Kazakh society of the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, a period that I believe should be seen as the final phase of Central Asian nomadism. In traditional Kazakh society all the main components of social and economic life—social organization, the settlement complex, dwelling, clothing, food, various kinds of folk knowledge, and the production cycle—reached a high degree of refinement. They were all highly adapted to the mobile pastoralist way of life and were employed as effective instruments for the optimal use of the environmental resources of the Great Steppe Belt.

COMMUNITY UNITS AND THEIR ROLE IN TRADITIONAL KAZAKH SOCIETY

Social relations within traditional Kazakh society were in many ways similar to those of other Eurasian nomadic societies, even when the ethnic, geographic, or ecological context differed. On a number of levels, these relationships influenced nearly every aspect of nomadic society: material and intellectual culture, including such elements as economic techniques, tools, and strategies; local or communal ethnic self-awareness and self-naming; various types of rituals, customs, rites



of passage, worldview, kinship structure, genealogy (*shejire*), ethnic stereotypes, moral-ethical and common-law norms of behavior; folkloric traditions; and even migratory routes.

The basic social and economic unit of traditional Kazakh society was the nuclear family, or *birata* (literally, “one ancestor”), which connected the group of blood relatives containing two or three generations in the male line. The *birata* was the main owner of livestock—the most important natural resource, since it was movable. But the *birata* units did not own land, which was indivisible and inalienable within the tribe. Communal territory was a necessary basis for economic production at the individual, family, and community levels. Therefore, the *birata* was not an entirely independent producing unit. It accomplished its function as direct producer only to the extent that it was tightly related to and mutually dependent on other such entities.

Another important and still vital element in Kazakh society is the *jetiata* (literally, “seven forefathers”), or the seven generations of ancestors every Kazakh must be able to know and recite. The *jetiata* forms a genealogically organized group of relatives (whether real or constructed) spanning seven generations in the male line, within which marriages are prohibited. This exogamic barrier to marriage relations was also an effectively institutionalized mechanism of economic and demographic regulation that helped to optimize the resources of the tribal environment.

The main function of community units was to enforce common law and the regulation of land use according to genealogical principles, that is, relationships among patriarchal entities relating to the use of corresponding segments of the tribal (communal) territory. This ensured balanced economic and juridical interactions among the *birata*, or patriarchal groups, in the traditional social system.

Thus, the core units of nomadic Kazakh society were the mutually dependent and mutually supporting core families of the *birata*. But it was the relations among the units that developed the specific social and political potential of the society. Only the framework of the *jetiata* provided institutional, ideological, sociocultural, economic, and even ecological density and intensity critical to the development of various types and levels of social relations within the nomadic sphere, relations that were vital for the entire nomadic community. Segmented access to economic resources was an effective means to guarantee environmental sustainability. But it also created fissions, frictions, and conflicts. Resources were negotiated and assigned along the genealogical principals and norms of *shejire* (literally, “lineage tree”), which therefore constituted an important source of regulation but also a sense of unity within nomadic society.

SHEJIRE: A FOLKLORISTIC GENRE AND ITS INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONS

The traditional Kazakh society was mainly founded upon communal principles of social organization. But

these principles are in fact much older and seem to go back at least to the Scythian-Sakā Period. The durability of these principles is probably due to the fact that they provided optimal conditions for the economic subsistence of mobile pastoralists.

Genealogical relations according to the principle of *shejire* were, at various levels, fundamental for the regulation of community relations within the nomadic society.⁶ The main purpose of genealogy, or *shejire*, was to establish relations among the patrilineal units of extended families—that is, among the main subjects of intercommunity relations. This was achieved by the coalescence of “community” and “family” in a seven-generation exogamic structure as the main organizational feature of the traditional Kazakh community. Thus, the genealogical structuring of social relations in the nomadic sphere provided the basis for the institutional organization of society.

Studies in contemporary ethnology have defined a more or less complete series of *shejire* variants, which allow us to follow the genealogy of a certain number of family groups, extending from what is known as the “poetico-mythical” or “cosmological” era to the modern period. About a hundred ethnoregional variants belonging to the same historiographic tradition have come down to us in the form of texts. Based on their ambition and content, they can be classified into six thematic groups:

- The first group of *shejire* has a general ethnic value: the origin of the Kazakhs is chronicled solely through edifying actions by famous historical or mythical figures, whom the tradition presents as the original ancestors of the Kazakh ethnic group.
- A second group relates to the *juz*—independent tribal unions. The Kazakhs were traditionally divided into three *juz*: the Great *Juz* (*ulu juz*), the Middle *Juz* (*orta juz*), and the Small *Juz* (*kichbi juz*). This group of *shejire* recounts the origin of these *juz*. We may conclude, based on its function and on an interpretation of its genealogical relationships, that this category of *shejire* reflects the group as a whole.
- A third, the tribal-familial group, is constituted in the same way as the two previous groups of *shejire* but has a more or less concrete relationship to

genealogical history. Associated with certain family-communities, it maintains structural ties among these groups. This category is distinct from other groups of *shejire*, particularly the following.

- The fourth, a familial-communal group, is in my view the fundamental systemic and signifying strand in the composition of the *shejire*. More than a narrative about the family-community's roots, it is a description of the structure still in force, that is, of the principles governing generational and sexual differentiation in kinship relations. Thus, the content of this strand of *shejire* is more or less concrete in nature.
- The fifth group, quantitatively insignificant, consists of historical narratives about certain representatives of the steppe aristocracy, for example, the *bi* (chiefs presiding over traditional judicial procedure) and the *rubas* (family and tribal chiefs). These accounts have a close organic link to a precise family-community, which must be viewed as an essential sociocultural context and the condition allowing for the *shejire*'s narrative interpretation of the origin of these privileged categories of nomads, an interpretation intended to defend the primacy of the communal principle over the individual principle. In conventional terms, it is possible to relate this group to the following category of *shejire*, which attests to the family chief's desire to trace his origin to famous, often legendary or even mythical figures. It may be deduced, based on its method and the type of interpretation it gives of the family chief's lineage, that this strand of *shejire* developed later than the others and dates to roughly the second half of the nineteenth century. At this time, under the powerful and growing influence of the Russian colonial system on the Kazakh social milieu, the individual principle began to play a fairly tangible role.
- The sixth group deals with two social categories—the *tore* (the Chinggiskhanids, that is, the descendants of Chinggis Khan) and the *koja* (representatives of the Muslim clergy)—and constitutes a special kind of *shejire*, determined above all by the privileged and exceptional position of these individuals within the traditional system of nomadic institutional relations.

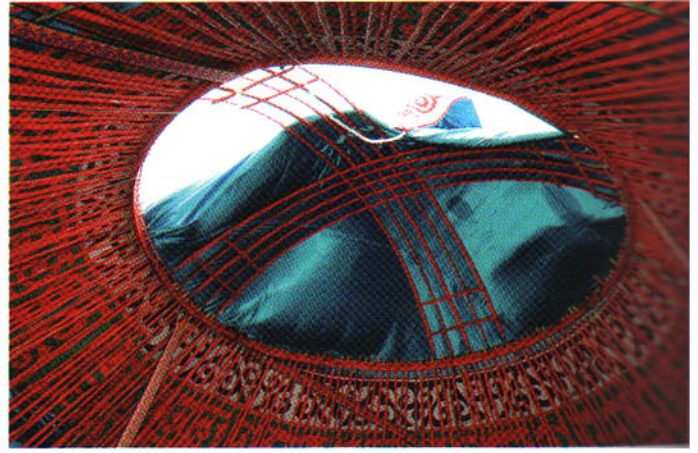


9-4 Kazakh saddle (*Kazaky er*). Wood, leather, and metal. Semipalatinsk region, early 20th century CE.

9-5 Saddle (*Kurandy er*). Wood and leather, Dzhambul region, early 20th century CE.



- 9-6 Kazakh saddle. (*Kazaky er*). Wood, leather, and metal, Almaty region, early 20th century ce.
- 9-7 Saddle (*Kurandy er*). Wood, leather, and metal, Almaty region, early 20th century ce.



- 9-8 (top) Kazakh yurt.
- 9-9 (center left) Interior of yurt.
- 9-10 (center right) Roof of yurt (*shanyrak*) and dome.
- 9-11 (bottom) Bed in yurt.

A final particularity of the *shejire* is its reference to an "ideal" personified past. To that end, and in complete accord with the poetico-mythical interpretation of history, the names of mythical figures (Alasha Khan, Ouisoun, Argyn, Alchyn, Abak) were introduced into genealogies, but so too were famous and very real historical figures (the prophet Muhammad, Chinggis Khan, Kotan Khan, Koblandy Batyr, Janibek Batyr), who were understood by the *shejire* to be the great founding ancestors of certain tribes or families. Nevertheless, the presence of these figures within the thematic structure of genealogies in no way modifies the definition proposed here of the *shejire* as a given aspect of popular historiography that takes the form of a genre of folklore. Indeed, within the *shejire* the historical role of these individuals was evaluated in the idiom of folklore, which turned historical figures into mythological figures and epic heroes.

Matrilineal kinship ties were known as *jien-nagashy*. They are to be understood within an interfamilial framework and context, in other words, within intercommunity relationships. In terms of the latter, and strictly in accord with the canons and prescriptions of the *shejire*, matrimonial ties had an essential systemic and regulatory function.

All community units were joined in tribes, and finally into *juz* (literally, "country" or "region"), or tribal confederations.⁷ As mentioned above, since the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Kazakhs were divided into three *juz*—the Great, Middle, and Small *juz*. Their founders were considered to be the sons of the Great Alash, the legendary forefather of all Kazakhs (*Alash balasy*, or "sons of Alash"). Therefore, the ties among *juz*, as also among tribes, bore a linear character and were justified by genealogical reasoning. Strictly speaking, both tribe and *juz* were institutionalized levels of the corresponding intercommunity relations: beyond the *birata*, sociopolitical relationships were expressed, legitimated, and perpetuated in genealogical terms. The basic principle in various spheres of nomadic life remained the core family. Sociospatial and economic organization of family territory took place along seasonal camp sites: the *jailau* (summer pasture), *kuzeu* (fall pasture), *kystau* (winter pasture), and *kokteu* (spring pasture). The unification of these segmented pastures into an extensive system of territories and migration paths among them was an integral part of folk knowledge and indispensable for

making practical use of the environment. This knowledge was handed down from generation to generation and further increased the importance of the communal principle of traditional Kazakh society.

THE UNITY OF AESTHETICS AND FUNCTIONALISM IN TRADITIONAL KAZAKH MATERIAL CULTURE

As noted above, community units are tightly bound to specific subsistence forms. Many elements typical of the material culture of mobile pastoralists belong to what are known as "small forms." They are mainly represented by leather, felt, textiles, wood, bone, and partially metal objects and are characterized by their functional mobility. Bulkiness of objects is functionally inconvenient in the mind of the nomads, and is considered aesthetically grotesque, since bulky objects are in opposition not only to the useful nature but also to the dynamic lifestyle of the nomads. At the same time, the organic unity of aesthetics and functionality in the texture of each object, with the primacy of the utilitarian principle, is the most important typological quality of objects in the nomadic sphere. The decoration of items produced by nomads "was subjugated to the purpose and meaning of the objects. . . . The object is fundamental, but the ornament is used to express its buildup and construction. It is called upon to underscore its function."⁸ The organic combination of practical everyday-life necessity and aesthetic value in the construction of an object is most beautifully demonstrated by the main portable dwelling—the yurt (figs. 9-8–9-11). The decor of the Kazakh yurt is a kind of symbolic demonstration of the ethnic spirit of the nomadic tradition. It semantically underscores the interrelationship between, on the one hand, the appropriated habitat and, on the other, nature and the cosmos.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TRADITIONAL KAZAKH SOCIETY

It is impossible to imagine the life of the nomads without their religious beliefs, including the ceremonies and rituals of the life cycle. As the spiritual-ideological context of everyday nomadic life, religious beliefs acted as important institutional regulators at practically all levels of social relations.

The absolute majority of modern Kazakhs (approximately 97 percent) call themselves Muslim. The beginning of the spread of this religious system within the territory of Kazakhstan was in the eighth century. However,

despite its impressive temporal depth, Islam in its canonical form was never firmly established among nomadic Kazakhs. Therefore, the religious faith of Kazakhs, as well as their ideology and practice of corresponding rituals and ceremonies, can be characterized as a combination of Islamic with shamanistic and "Tengristic" elements, principles, and techniques. In the traditional Kazakh sphere the main institutions, attributes, and precepts of Islam were reworked in accord with the nomadic ideology and worldview. However, one cannot say that shamanistic traditions or Tengri belief had a firm religious position in the nomadic sphere. In any case, in the visible historical past of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the position of Kazakh shamans (*bakсы*) was so weak that their main role was reduced to performing the function of healers (*тауып*).

The main subjects of worship and reverence in the traditional Kazakh sphere were *aruakhs*, spirits of the ancestors that had, according to ancient beliefs, both protective and destructive functions. It was believed that the spirits protected not only people but also animals, as well as the most notable natural and cult objects. For example, a whole system of ritual-ceremonial institutions and rules was called upon to help nomads truly feel the benevolent force of sanctified natural and cultural places or objects (*kiesi bar*, literally, "having spirit-benefactor"), such as sacred mountains, rivers, lakes, groves, natural boundaries, ancient structures, kurgans, and tribal cemeteries. The nomads believed that they had benefactor-masters in the shape of spirits of the ancestors (*aruakhs*) and great animals (for example, the mighty he-camel and the huge maned wolf). The stability and actuality of the multigenerational collective memory of these and other specific natural and cult objects were guaranteed by the whole cycle of legends, stories, and myths—for example, myths describing the creation of the lake Balkhash and the rivers Ili and Karatal, and the formation of the Great Steppe Sary-Arka. Sanctified by tradition, these locations with their spirit-benefactors, together with the corresponding ritual-ceremonial complex, motivated the collective devotion of community members to the tribal territory. In this capacity the locations were very effective institutionalized ideological methods of geographic self-identification for the community.

This essay offers a short characterization of the cultural traditions of the nomads of traditional Kazakh society,

who functioned in full accord with the principles and norms of communal relations. These relations were the main mechanism for mobilizing the social energy of community members within the channel of the "precepts of the great ancestors" (*ata-baba joly*), at least some of which may have had their root in the ancient nomadic cultures that are presented in this exhibition.

Translated by Maya Naunton

NOTES

- 1 *Казахское хозяйство в его естественно-исторических и бытовых условиях: материалы к выработке норм земельного устройства в КазАССР* 1926; Мацкевич 1929; Вайнштейн 1991; Масанов 1995.
- 2 Вайнштейн 1991.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Алимбай 2009a, 317–25.
- 5 Алимбай 2004, 185–93.
- 6 Regarding the institutional nature and function of *sbejire* among Kazakhs, see Алимбай 2009b, 373–86.
- 7 The term *juz* refers to a potestarian political federation of tribes. The well-known Orientalist V. P. Yudin, referring to a report by the Russian “servicemen T. Petrov and I. Kunitchin about travel in Kalmyk lands . . . in 1616,” and also to materials in the work *Sharaf-nāma-i Shāht* of the medieval author Hafiz Tanish, speculated that at the beginning of the seventeenth century “the separation of the three *juz* had already occurred.” See Ибрагимов и др. 1969, 243.
- 8 Акишев 1984, 7–9.