

Nomadic Culture of Medieval Central Asia: A Study of the Kazakh Cultural traits their Changes and Continuities

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Abstract: The nomadic people of Central Asia have played a very important role in the various Socio political and economic developments from historic times not only in the region but also in the adjoining areas like South Asia, West Asia and the Europe. They have contributed lot towards the cultural advancement of Central Asia. Their cultural traits are deeply embedded in their nomadic lifestyle. Even in the Succeeding years during the Soviet and Post Soviet years, these cultural practices were still practiced by these nomads. The Soviet planners does not succeeded in uprooting these peculiar cultural traits of nomads, even the globalization failed to uproot them completely. The present paper is a humble attempt to analyze the various peculiar cultural traits of the Kazakh nomads of medieval Central Asia, the impact of Soviet policies on their cultural traits and their continuities in the succeeding generations.

Keywords: Nomadic culture, peculiar customs and traditions, Soviet policies, Cultural synthesis, Globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Central Asia was an important center of Culture in the past and it continuously played its due role in the cultural advancement during the medieval period. The Geographic location of Central Asia; between China, with other lands of East Asia, and the west, both Western Asia and Europe, Central Asia played very important role in the development of trade and commerce, as well as exchange of ideas between east and west. The area was also the meeting ground of various religions of the world like Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism and finally Islam.[1] Central Asia is fascination for its cultural mosaic (the frontier of Persian, Turkish and Slavic language areas), Central Asia came under the occupation of various racial groups, at varying levels of their cultural advancement, it attained vibrant and rich culture as a result of the role played by the intermixing of the races, be they Scythians, Huns, Turks, Arabs, Mongols etc or because of the role played by the Silk Route ,which not only fetched smooth path to traders and missionaries but it also allowed cultural exchanges. From the historic times the nomads of Central Asia established many confederacies in order to manage their affairs and accumulate sufficient strength to deal with their opponents; there were many more city states which left behind a record of their cultural and economic achievements in the shape of metallic and non metallic implements, inscriptions and burial remains. The two major races of the world, the Caucasian and the Mongoloid had their early development here. The medieval period was the climax for nomads during this period they achieved political and Cultural expansion.[2] During the medieval period, these nomadic Turkic and Mongol tribes where, organized into groups called Kyrgyz's, Kara Kyrgyz's etc.[3] Among the main nomadic populations of Central Asia, the Kazakh, the Kyrgyz and the Turkmens were the most important. Among them the Kazakhs were the major nomadic people of Eurasia. The Kazakhs are the ancient people whose history stretches beyond the beginning of the Christian era. The formation of

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Kazakhs as a nation was a lengthy process and it is too difficult to ascribe any precise dating to its formation. However it is evident from an overall consideration of the historical, ethnographic and linguistic materials that the formation of Kazakhs as a nationality had been largely completed by the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the sixteenth century.[4] Over the centuries, Kazakh culture has been shaped by a nomadic pastoral economy, a tribal social structure, customary laws, a blend of Islamic and shamanic religious beliefs, and Russian and Soviet colonization. The nature of the Kazakh nomads was nicely illustrated by the historical sources. Kasym Khan, who was considered the unifier of the nomadic tribes provides a ethno cultural portrait of these nomads, “we are inhabitants of the steppe; we have no rare or valuable possessions or goods; our most valuable possession are our horses, meat and the skin from it serve as our best food and clothing; our most enjoyable drink is their milk and what we prepare from it, we have no gardens and buildings on our land, our place of recreation is our cattle pasture and the herding of horses; we go to the herds and take pleasure in the sight of horses.”[5] Besides horses they also rear animals like sheep’s, camel’s etc. The Kazakhs have a patrilineal tribal social structure. In the pre Czarist period, they were divided into hordes “*zhuz*” which were subdivided into a number of tribes or clans “*taipa* or *ru*”, which were further segmented into tribal lineages “*ata* or *ru*”. Tribal leader’s khans and “*bais*” had authority over families who lived within their territory and managed relations between tribal groups. Traditionally conflicts over land, livestock, family and kinship were resolved through either customary laws “*adat*” or Islamic *sharia* laws. The Kazakh nomadic women were not subjected to the yoke of the laws of the *shariat* to the same degree that the Uzbek women were, they were never veiled; they took part in festivals along with men.[6]

2. CULTURAL TRAITS OF KAZAKH NOMADS IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

There were various peculiar cultural traits of Kazakh nomads in the medieval period. One of the cultural traits of Kazakh nomads was their adherence to Islam. They were superficially Islamic and their religion was composed of many elements[7] although the Islamic element was present, Shamanist elements, clan and ancestor cult were also its elements. Islam became the official religion of the Kazakhs in the 16th and 17th centuries and the main centers were Turkestan, Khwarazam, Bukhara and Astrakhan.[8] The spread of Islam among the Kazakhs was an uneven process both in terms of geography and the extent of adherence to the shariah as is evidenced by the fact that in 1509 A.D., the Shaybani ulma issued a fatwa against Kazakhs since they were considered apostates who purposely violated Islamic tenants.[9] Up to the 18th century; the Central Asian nomads remained only superficially Islamized. Despite the teachings of Islam the people long continued to worship their ancestors and kept images of them. The Kazakhs also worshiped the spirits of the earth (*zher-ana*) and water (*su-ana*), to whom they consecrated unusually shaped mountains and cliffs, caves, groves, lone trees and springs, they also continued to worship the tutelary spirits of sheep (*sholpan-ata*), cows (*zengi-ata*), horses (*kambar-ana*) and camels (*oysil-qara*). Offerings of mare’s milk were made to the moon and sun, with prayers for obtaining the life giving gift of water and dew. Fire worship (*ot-ana*) played a very important part in the life of Kazakhs. Fire was regarded as the tutelary spirit of home and hearth.[10] While in the South Central Asia, People followed to some extent the Islamic tenets, the people in north pursued the nomadic life with their own set of beliefs. The prevalence of shamanist elements and ancestor cults formed the main religion of steppe nomads.[11] In the times of need the *aurak* (soul of ancestors) were prayed and invoked by the shaman to help in overcoming any difficulty in life, an epidemic, childlessness, drought, famine etc.

Another peculiar character of the nomads of the medieval Central Asia was their dwellings. Kazakh nomads were living in movable dwellings of various shapes, sizes and designs known as yurts. Nomads traditionally built very little, as in their philosophical world view humans should disturb the land as little as possible. Therefore for centuries their housing was limited to easily assembled temporary tents (yurts) in the springs, summers, and falls, while during the winters people lived in dugouts or simple cottages made of sun dried bricks or rocks or a combination of both. Thus, very few examples of ancient or medieval architecture can be found in the vast areas of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkistan.[12] One more peculiar cultural trait of Kazakh nomads was the practice of bride abduction. The Kazakh word for bride kidnapping “*alyq qashu*”, literally means “to take and run” was generally used to refer to both consensual and non consensual bride kidnappings. In the medieval period the practice was quite common and was an alternative way for poor man to get married since it does not involve substantial expenses. The practice was an exploitative one and curbed the freedom of women, even if she resists and returns back to her home, she has to face the burden of shame and was labeled as no more virgin.[13] The Kazakh traditional food was also unique consists of meat, especially the meat of horse and mare’s milk “*kumis*”, besides sheep milk and the products of milk were their staple food items. *Beshparmak* (made of boiled meat and paste) was counted as a top dish. *Palau*, *sorpa*, *manty* and *kospa* were some other traditional dishes.[14] Russia had started its imperialist designs in the end of the 17th century and by the end of the 19th century the whole steppe region was

under the Russian rule.[15] The Czars were primarily concerned with political and economic control of the area and were cautious about introducing changes in the socio cultural set up of the newly conquered people.[16] It is said that the Czarist government was not interested in bringing socio economic changes in the region or had little intention of educating the Central Asians, which is substantiated by the remarks of an unspecified dignitary, "I am not impressed by the wild dreams of philanthropists who want to civilize (ustroit), the Kirgiz (i-e including the Kazakhs) to educate them and raise them to the level of European nation. I wish from the bottom of my heart that the Kirgiz for ever remain nomadic shepherds, never sow corn or have nothing to do with learning or even with craftsmanship." [17] Czarist policy towards these people aimed to cripple their cultures and languages, keep them in ignorance and finally, where possible to Russify them.[18] Before the coming of the Russians in Central Asia in the late 18th century, the history of Central Asian nomads was complicated one as it was the part of historical Turkistan - a land of many nationalities and religions. Hence it was difficult to separate the history of Central Asia from rest of Turkistan.[19] During the Czarist period, the Kazakhs undoubtedly remained nomads. They preserved many characteristics of their nomadic culture and they continued to live in the yurts which were easy to assemble and fold up. They were very important for their seasonal movement from one grazing ground to another, as well as for a quick movement of the tribes in accordance with political need. Although many Kazakh and Kyrgyz began to settle in towns and villages and many villages were named after Kyrgyz and Kazakh ethnic groups such as Kyrgyz- kishlaks (Kyrgyz villages) were found in the region.[20]

3. CULTURAL TRAITS OF KAZAKH NOMADS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

Although the Czarist government was cautious about introducing changes in the culture of these nomadic people, the Soviet regime pressed hard and showed no such hesitation and brought rapid changes in the nomadic culture.[21] The Soviet policy makers believed that these peculiar nomadic cultural traits of Kazakhs were incompatible with the ideological goals and objectives of the revolutionary Soviet state that claimed it to be a modern Soviet Society. Therefore Soviets undermined and destroyed all forms of traditional, religious, social and cultural identities in Central Asia and replace them with Soviet ones. In order to uproot these cultural traits, Soviets adopted a comprehensive programme like fragmentation of Turkistan politically, territorially and culturally, by isolating people of Central Asia from their historic past and by defaming and destructing of religious beliefs and values.[22] The first goal of Soviet policy was to settle the Kazakh and destroy their tribal genealogical kin ties which were fundamental to tribal social and political life.[23] Islamic legal and educational institutions were abolished and Islamic beliefs and practices almost obliterated. Soviet government adopted a dual policy of destruction and strengthening, some measures give a death knell to the Islam like banning of fasting, prayers, and many other customs, rituals and traditions on the other side the formation of Religious board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was a healthy development for strengthening Islam. Despite this, the Soviet leadership systematically narrowed down among the minds of Muslims, the sphere of Islam to such an extent that it vanished from the spiritual life of the society.

The nomadic way of life continued until the late 1920's when they were forced to settle down in built up colonies and villages.[24] Up to the 1930's the nomadic housing was quite popular in Kazakhstan. Soviet government implemented a campaign of forceful sedenterization of pastoral nomads in Central Asia. In the Soviet period they began to live in the small apartments provided by the Soviet government. Khrushchev reversed the trend called for the mass production of synthetic materials for yurts, more durable than the traditional felt and wooden frames. "Shepherds fulfill a very important function in the national economy he stated, and as long as there are shepherds yurts are indispensable."

The Soviet government banned the age old custom of bride abduction and severe punishments were perpetuated on those who commit such type of acts. Although in some kidnappings there was consent from bride but in many cases these abductions were forced. The traditional practice curbs women's freedom of choice, freedom of education and compelled them to assign traditional roles and make women dependent on her husband's will. Though, the Soviet planners curbed the practice to a large extent through legislation and propaganda, but the practice was not totally wiped out. Women to a large extent were responsible for it, they were afraid of the possible options of resistance and did not feel secure to turn to state for help. In 1990's 80% of women were stolen as brides in southern Kazakhstan.[25] In spite of restrictions, the practice continued in the Soviet period. During the socialist period the most marked change was that bread and meal had become staples. Making and drinking of "kumis" became rare, but tea consumption became higher. Kazakhs dietary habits have changed during the Soviet period. The greatest change was the acceptance of bread as staple food. People who were residing in the cities began to eat both Russian and Kazakh dishes.[26] The tradition of taking tea on several times besides *qazy* (horse meat), fermented mare's milk and the *shabat* fermented camel's milk continued in the Soviet period.

4. CULTURAL TRAITS OF KAZAKH NOMADS IN THE POST SOVIET PERIOD

After independence in Central Asia a separate religious board was created for Central Asian Muslims, there was revival of Islam in the post independent Central Asia.[27] Although people began to follow Islam strictly, the age old nomadic religious traditions keep their way on. The architectural landscape fundamentally changed during twentieth century, the Soviet and the globalization impact was visible in the vast nomadic steppe of Central Asia. In the post independent period *yurt* was made a national symbol, in the remote areas yurt received considerable significance as a symbol of people's link to the past.[28] The practice of bride stealing gets momentum in the post Soviet period. Since the post Soviet Kazakhstan build their national identities distant from former USSR. This national rebuilding resulted in returning to the old patriarchal traditions, particularly to the social inequality between men and women. The state policies which enforce national culture, the disbelief in post Soviet legislation that fail to maintain laws which sustain gender inequality, and the poor economic situation or insecure state of the citizens are the causes responsible for non consensual bride kidnapping in post Soviet Kazakhstan. Since the respective governments does not create a particular or specific law for bride kidnapping, in contrast to the Soviet period. There is no law in their legislation that provides punishments for bride kidnapping directly. Thus the practice revived in the post Soviet period.[29] In the post independent period national or traditional foods still preserve their place. But one can easily find European, Chinese, Indian, Turkish and Arabic cuisines in Kazakhstan. The impact of globalization can be observed in the cuisine, too. Kumis as a national beverage still preserves an important place in and Kazakh culture.[30]

5. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it becomes clear that though the Soviets undertook various efforts in order to uproot the traditional cultural traits of Kazakh nomads, but in spite of their social, political and economic measures, the cultural traits if not totally destroyed, showed considerable change. Despite Soviet policies and globalization, Kazakh nomads had still preserved these cultural traits in their day to day life. In the post independent period there was revival of old customs, rituals and traditions. Giving too much importance to nomadic traditions in the nation building process created divisions in Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic society. While it helped in establishing strong attachment of ethnic Kazakhs to their homeland, it diminishes the attachment of non-Kazakhs to their multi ethnic nation, and is responsible for creating polarity and division rather than unity in the republic.

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