

Geo-Cultural Identity of the Western Turkestan

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Introduction

Today the Central Asia comprises five independent republics, i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. From its beginning in 1917, the Soviet state never included Kazakhstan in Muslim Central Asia, preferring to give it a non-Asian identity by linking it closely to Russia and Siberia. Today, however, the Kazakhs themselves and the world at large believe they are very much part of the region. The Central Asia covers an area of 3,993,300 square kilometers, which includes some of the most sparsely populated regions in the world. Uzbekistan has a population of 20.5 million, and Uzbeks form substantial minorities in all other four republics. There were some 10.6 million Russians living in Central Asia in 1992, but there has been a large-scale exodus from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Central Asia lies at the heart of the Eurasian continent. Completely landlocked, it borders Iran and Afghanistan to the south, China to the east and Russia to the north and west. The main Central Asian Steppe is bounded by the Caspian Sea in the west, the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountain ranges in the south and the Tien Shan mountains in the east. There are no fixed boundaries in the north; where the Kazakh steppe merges into the Siberian steppe in a flat landscape that is punctured with numerous lakes.

Especially, the lands between the two rivers, i.e., Amudarya and Syr Darya, which today comprises Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have produced the main developments of Central Asian history and culture. Both these long and broad rivers formed formidable frontiers for the ancient world. The Amudarya divided the Persian empire and its culture

from the nomadic empires of the Central steppe. The same river later formed the frontier for the Tsar and the communists, separating the Central Asia from first the British empire in India and then the Islam world to the south. Meanwhile the Syr Darya formed the only northern barrier for the Persian, Greek, Arab and then Turkic kingdoms in Central Asia, protecting them from nomadic invasions from Mongolia and the Gobi desert.

The Central Asia, which Sir Halford Mackinder called in 1904 the Heartland of the World, has undergone cultural and political transformation as result of its interactions with the Persian, Chinese, Arabic, Indian and Russian civilizations since time immemorial. The Central Asia has developed in this geocultural and geopolitical context.¹

In this article, I tried to discuss about the geocultural identity of the Central Asia, assessing its interaction with other cultures and civilizations and describing its geocultural developments through history.

I. Geo-Cultural Developments of the Central Asia from the Ancient Period

1. The Substratum of the Nomadic Altaic Culture

The overwhelmingly majority of the Central Asian peoples consist of Turkic people groups. The Turkic ethnic groups in Central Asia or Inner Asia that were and some still are primarily pastoral nomads. That is, their fundamental economic activity was livestock production, which was carried out through the purposeful seasonal movement of livestock and their human masters living in portable dwellings over a series of already delineated pasturages in the course of a year. This was not aimless wandering in search of grass and water, as the cliché of the

¹ Geoculture can be understood as the superstructure of a world. In addition to this concept, I tend to think of it as its underside, the part that is more hidden from view and therefore more difficult to assess, but the part without which the rest would not be nourished. Geoculture is with geopolitics by analogy, not because it is supra-local or national but because it represents the cultural framework within which a world system operates. See Wallersteine 1991: 11.

Chinese sources would have it. The ecology of a given group's particular zone determined, to a considerable extent, the composition and size of its herds and the attendant human camping units – usually 8-12 family units. This is a form of economic production that appears to have developed out of sedentary animal husbandry among groups that practiced both agriculture and stockbreeding.²

Most pastoral nomadic societies of Eurasia continued to practice some form of at least vestigial agriculture. Distinct forms of socio-cultural and political organization evolved or were brought into being in response to the demands of this type of economic activity and the nature of the interaction of the nomads with their sedentary neighbors.

In the Kazakhstan steppe and even a few miles outside Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, nomads still follow traditions established some 3,000 years ago. Living alone in small yurts, tents made of felt, they tend flocks of goats and sheep in the high mountain passes for much of the summer months. In the winter they come down to the collective farms to overwinter, their flocks living off the fodder cultivated in the summer months. In Karakorum desert outside Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmenistan, horsemen still spend their lives like their forefathers did, tending herds of horses and camels in the midst of a harsh scrubland and frequent sandstorms.

Turkic population of today in Eurasia continent show extraordinary physical diversity, certainly much greater than that of any other group of speakers of an Altaic language. The original Turkic physical type, if we can really posit such, for it should be borne in mind that this mobile and nomadic population was intermixing with its neighbors at a very early stage, was probably of the Mongoloid type. We may deduce this from the fact that populations in previously Europoid areas of Iranian speech begin to show Mongoloid influences coincidental with the appearance of Turkic peoples in the Central Asia. The physical transformation of these Turkicizing peoples, however, never equalled the linguistic change which far outpaced it. This can be illustrated by the

² Khazanov, *Nomads*, pp. 15ff, 89-90

populations of Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and especially the Turkic populations of Iran and Turkey itself.³

To add to the complexity of this process, the Turkic populations that moved into Central Asia were themselves already mixed. In general then the further east, the more Mongoloid the Turkic populations is; the further west, the more Europoid.

However, the overwhelming majority of the Turkic peoples have, in addition to a common point of origin and linguistic ties, a largely shared history and resultant culture as well with a common tradition of nomadic life. The overwhelming majority of the Turkic peoples in Eurasia or Inner Asia have been part of the great Eurasia nomadic empires although often in different capacities: Hyung-nu, Gök Türk, Mogolian Chingis Khan, Timur, Selcuk, Osman, etc. The imperial institutions and traditions developed in these empires played a role in shaping the political culture and geoculture of the Central Asia. Thus, there are common geo-cultural threads that join Osmans, Tatars, Uzbeks, Kazakhs and more distantly the Chuvash.

In forming these geocultural ties of nomadic empires in Central Asian or Inner Asian Turkic peoples, we must take into account the role of ancient religion or shamanism. This element, essential to any analysis of European or Middle Eastern “proto-national feeling”⁴ has been almost completely neglected as an element of politics and consciousness shaping in the steppe world prior to the victory of Islam in the region.

Shamanism, the grass roots “religion” of the nomads and forest peoples of the Central Asia and Inner Asia, elements of which persisted as potent substratal forces in the religions later adopted by the Turkic peoples, provided another source of identification. We have yet to explore fully, however, the question of how it impinged on the consciousness of those who draw the bow in their self-definition. The Tengri cult was widespread among the Turkic peoples as the same as the other Altaic people groups, i.e., Mongolian, Korean, etc. This cult

³ Oshanin, *Anthropological*, pp. xxv-xxvi

⁴ Hobsbaum, *Nations and Nationalism*, pp. 49-50, 67-73

served as a basic prop for the ideology of the ancient Turkic states as well as the other Altaic states, e.g., Mongolian, Manchu and Korean.

Turning to the linguistic context of the Central Asian languages, Turkic languages are closely related to the nomadic Inner Asian languages, linguistically belong to the Altaic language group or the Altaic Unity, which comprises Mongolian, Manchu-Tungus and Korean. Among these Altaic languages, the Turkic languages over the last two millennia have been steadily advancing in Eurasia and the Middle East, absorbing speakers of Indo-European, Uralic, Paleo-Asiatic or Paleo-Siberian, Caucasian and Semitic. There have been important contacts with Middle Chinese and less directly with Indic. Thus, any discussion of the relations of the Turkic peoples with their neighbors, must, of necessity, begin by viewing them within the larger ethno-linguistic context of Eurasia or Inner Asia. Some groups have steadily shrunk, e.g. the Paleo-Siberian, Turkic languages have shifted their habitats. Present day, the Turkic languages are spoken all over the Eurasia continent from the Far East Asia to the Balkan, i.e., in Siberia, Mongolia, China, the former Soviet Central Asia, Afganistan, the Caucasus region, the Middle East, Asia Minor, and the Balkan area.

2. Development of the Islamic Persian-Turk Culture in the Medieval Period

The Central Asian culture was developed through history from the so-called Persian-Turk Islamic culture which is an ecumenical mix of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic elements that melded in the 9th and 10th centuries in eastern Iran and Transoxiana. From there, the culture was carried by conquering peoples to neighboring areas, so that it eventually became the predominant culture of the ruling and elite classes of West and Central Asia, i.e., Persian-Turkic peoples

The underlying stratum from which Persian-Turk Islamic culture sprang was Persian, i.e., two Persian empires - the Achaemenids of the 4th and 5th centuries BC and the Sasanians of the 3rd to 7th centuries AD. The emperors, to emphasize their majesty, built loft palaces, cultivated luxuriant gardens, presided from grand thrones, and wore huge crowns. They also patronized specialists of high culture: architects,

artists, fine craftsmen, poets, and scholars.⁵ Subsequent generations celebrated in particular the glory of the Achaemenid emperors, Cyrus and Darius, and after the Hellenic invasion, Alexander.

When the Iranian peoples of Persia -southwestern Iran- and Khorasan and Transoxiana -Mawrahnnahir- were overwhelmed by the Arab Muslim armies in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., they became part of an empire much larger than any previously under Persian rule. Under the Arab caliphs, especially in the strong caliphal period in AD 692-945, a cosmopolitan culture was molded from the strands of many traditions; commercial and tribal law from Arabia, philosophy from the Hellenic world,⁶ architecture from Syria and Persia, and astrology, medicine, music, and mathematics from India.⁷ The language that integrated this culture was Arabic, and of it many Iranians became masters. Iranians made important contributions to the scholarship and works of fine art that were burgeoning in the Islamic empire.

At the same time the Arabs conqueror of Iran were being persianized, for although they were originally garrisoned as soldiers, they soon settled in the towns and cities, especially in Khorsan, where conquerors and subjects melded into a single persianized society.⁸

The culture that emerged in Khorasan and Transoxiana reflected a great deal of the culture that had been in place before the coming of Islam. Middle Persian, the language of Sasanian Persia –Pahlavi written Persian – continued in wide use. Well into the Islamic century of the 8th century AD, it was the medium of administration in the eastern lands of the caliphate – in the Iranian plateau and Transoxiana in the heart of the Central Asia. When Arabic became the official language in the region, it was itself reshaped by Persian influences, as was Persian by Arabic.⁹

⁵ Yarshater 1988: 5-12, Perry 1978: 203

⁶ Hodgson 1974: I-235, I-239ff

⁷ Ikram 1964: 14-19

⁸ Daniel 1979: 19-22, See Frye 1975 for more detail about the Persian influence on Arab in the period.

⁹ Ullah 1963: 46

However, despite the Arabicization of public affairs, the Iranians retained much of their pre-Islamic outlook and way of life, adjusted to fit the demands of Islamic dogma.¹⁰

Under the Abbasid rule, Persianate customs became the style of the ruling elite. Affecting the demeanor of Sasanian Persian emperors, the Abbasids wore Persian clothing, instituted such Persian offices as vizier and executioner, established their new capital, Baghdad, near the site of the Sasanian capital, and like Achaemenids and Sasanians erected grand palaces and supported artists and scholars who celebrated their rule.¹¹

In the 9th and 10th centuries, there were political and cultural movements among the Iranian peoples that indicated a growing frustration with the Abbasid caliphate and the Arabic hegemony. The separation of the eastern lands from caliphal control and the rise of radical religious and social movements reflected the growing assertiveness of the Iranian peoples. It was finally to be expressed in a distinctive Persian-Turk culture that would become the dominant culture of West and Central Asia. It would persist, at least in the form of the Osman Empire, into the present century. This new Persian-Turk culture was marked by the use of the new Persianized Turkic language as a medium of administration and literature by the rise of Turkic rule in West and Central Asia in the 14th and 15th centuries.¹²

On the other hand, as New Persian appeared under the cultivation of the Samanid court, other social and structural developments were taking place that the court did not foster. The most important thing was the ascension to power of Persianized Turks. These Turks would be the main patrons of Persianate culture. The political ascendancy of the Turkic peoples was manifest in three 10th-11th century

¹⁰ Yarshater 1988: 4

¹¹ Hodgson 1974: I-283

¹² The so-called New Persian language as a medium of administration and literature emerged in the 9th and 10th centuries. However this Persian written language began to be replaced by the Persianized Turkic languages some centuries later as Turkic empires rose in West and Central Asia, such as Selchuk, Timur, Osman empires.

developments, in the decay of Persian Samanids and in the rise of Turkic pastoralists in the countryside.

An early dramatic indication of the rise of Turks in Samanid times was the loss of their southern territories to one of their Turkic mercenary warriors or *ghulams*.¹³ They began to rule the city of Ghazni and extended over the southeastern area of Samanid territories.

The Turkic empire became the most powerful in the east –in the southern Central Asia- since the Abbasid caliphs had been at their peak, and the capital at Ghazni became second only to Baghdad in cultural elegance.¹⁴ It attracted not only Turkic warriors but also many learned authorities of Persian and Arabic culture, i.e., poets, historians, linguists, and mathematicians. The Ghaznavids(989-1149 AD) were essentially Persianized Turks who in the mixed manner of the nomadic Turkic tradition and the pre-Islamic Persians encouraged the development of high culture on the new base of Islamic religion.¹⁵

Before the Ghaznavid Turks broke away, the Samanid rulership was internally falling to its Turkic mercenary servants. By the latter part of the 10th century, as the Samanid rulers were themselves preoccupied with the high culture, they gave the direction of their army to Turk generals. These generals eventually had effective control over all Samanid affairs.

As these Turks were gaining control of the Samanid rulership from within, other Turks, the Qarakhanids(999-1140 AD), were gaining pre-eminence over the countryside. The Qarakhanids were pastoralists from noble backgrounds and they cherished their Turkic ways. As they gained strength they fostered the development of a new Turkic literature alongside the Persian and Arabic literatures that had arisen earlier. As the 10th century ended, the Turk generals of the Samanid regime gave way to the pastoralist Qarakhanids.

¹³ The definition of *ghulams* or *Mamluks* as slaves was questioned recently. See the Beckwith's article(1984).

¹⁴ See Bosworth(1963) for the Ghaznavid cultural achievements.

¹⁵ Canfield 1991: 8

The impact of the Turks on Persian-Turk culture has been imperfectly defined so far. The Turks and Iranians were culturally similar or at least intermixed. The main difference between them may have been their livelihood; pastoral for the Turks and sedentary for the Iranians. The rise of Turks to power probably mainly entailed prominence of pastoralist culture.

3. The Influence of the Russian-Soviet Culture in the Modern Period

The incorporation of the Central Asia, i.e., the Kazakh Steppe and Western Turkistan into the Russian Empire during the 6 decades ending in 1885, was the last chapter in Russian state building before the 1917 Revolution. As such it was the culmination of a centuries-old process whereby a Russian state growing in strength expanded its territory at the expense of neighboring societies that were at a much lower level of technological and organizational development or that had lost their former capacity to deal with Russia as superiors.

During the process of the Russia's conquest of the Central Asia in the 19th century, Russian ideologists, historians, geographers, and proponents of the Eurasianist view of Russia's manifest destiny evolved a distinctly civilizing role with the burden of Russian inferiority in relation to the West.

In the period of Russian rule, net Russian immigration was 206,000 in the decade from 1896 to 1905 and 834,000 in the period from 1906 to 1916. Some 300,000 to 500,000 Russian settlers had arrived before 1896. Of the total net immigration between 1896 and 1916, 56 percent settled in Akmolinsk oblast, 24 percent in Turgai and Uralsk, 19 percent in Semipalatinsk and Semireche, and only 1 percent in the Syr Darya.¹⁶

Russian colonization had a dramatic impact on the cultural economy of the steppe in the Russian rule. By the year of 1916, the sown area in the four steppe oblasts increased by almost four times, with 95 percent of the increase. In 1916, Russians farmed from 64 percent to 96

¹⁶ Demko 1969: 98-99

percent of the cultivated land in the steppe oblasts and 36 percent in Semireche.¹⁷

Nomads were forced to find other pastures, often on marginal land in the more arid southern reaches of the steppe. Herds and incomes consequently declined just as Russian and Tatar traders became regular visitors among the nomads. By 1916, roughly 30 percent of the Kazakhs had settled down as agriculturists, but many had little or no land or land of marginal value; many turned to agricultural laborers. Some nomads shifted to a semi-sedentary grain and livestock economy.¹⁸

Russian Empire was a colonial empire, where ethnic inequality, discrimination and socio-cultural differences between particular ethnic groups precluded any semblance of socio-political unity. This was the main reason for the breakup of the empire shortly after the Marxist revolution.

The new Socialist regime managed to reclaim most of what it regard as its prosperity only by military force. Yet the problem remained of how to transform the former empire into a multi-ethnic state. Lenin unwillingly gave up his idea of an unitary proletarian state and proposed to set up a federal union of sovereign republics, insisting later that it should be limited to military defense and foreign affairs.

But the confederation solution was rejected because complete decentralization of government was incompatible with the authoritarian regime. Under the totalitarian system the union of sovereign republics degenerated into a hyper-centralized unitary state, resembling a giant corporation with the republics, retaining some cultural autonomy and nominal representative bodies. The official theory of the blending nations and the formation of the Soviet people as a new historical community presupposed complete elimination of ethnic differences, not sparing the ethnic Russians, and the creation of a supra-ethnic, Russian speaking Soviet society.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 158-161

¹⁸ Becker 1994: 32

¹⁹ Prazauskas 1993: 27-28

The policy of forced integration, intense indoctrination and assimilation produced some results. A considerable portion of the Slav population and some assimilated groups of the minorities, such as the Soviet Koreans no longer have much of an ethnic identity and preferred to call themselves 'Soviet human beings'.

Important components of nation building of the Soviet style were cultural revolution and the attempt to overcome regional socio-economic disparities. However, industrial development of the ethnic periphery was rather counterproductive of the purposes of national integration. Since local conditions and demands were totally ignored, the setting up of large industries was accompanied by large-scale migration of the Slav population, mostly ethnic Russians, to other union republics.

The result was a dramatic change in the ethnic composition of the republics, and in some cases the indigenous nationality became a minority.

By 1959 the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyzs constituted 30 percent and 40.5 percent of the total population in their republics. The immigrants were concentrated mainly in industrial centers and big cities where the local groups were soon minorities. In 1989, in the capital cities of three republics, the indigenous groups constituted less than 45 percent of the population, in Almaty 22.3 percent, in Dushanbe 38.0 percent, and in Tashkent 43.8 percent. But, because of a higher birthrate the proportion of indigenous nationalities in Central Asia is growing and the share of ethnic Russians is decreasing. Between 1959 and 1989, it fell from 13.5 to 8.3 percent in Uzbekistan, from 30.2 to 21.5 percent in Kyrgyzstan, from 13.3 to 7.6 percent in Tajikistan and from 17.3 to 9.5 percent in Turkmenistan.²⁰

On the other hand, except for the spheres of government and intellectual activity, stratification favours unequal distribution of real power and authority with Russian-speaking Europeans comprising the overwhelming majority of managers in large industries, the personnel of the communications system, the KGB, and army officers. There is a striking similarity between ethnic stratification in the Soviet Central Asia

²⁰ Prazauskas, op. cit., pp. 28-29

and the colonial situation that inevitably gives rise to ideas of Russian domination and latent Russophobia, intensifying the anti-Russian feeling among the Central Asian peoples.

Large scale migration, the creation of uniform institutions, standardization of education and intensive indoctrination facilitated the growth of some elements of the supra-ethnic Soviet culture and some common values and beliefs, which had considerable influence on the geocultural identity of the Central Asia.

However, the Soviet Union never constituted an integrated socio-cultural entity. Historically, the present territory of the former Soviet Union comprises several supra-ethnic cultural regions – the Slav core, the western fringe and the Turkic speaking Muslim belt, besides a number of smaller or intermediate ethnic regions. Cultural and linguistic division tends to overlap with racial differences reinforcing them and serving as socio-cultural markers, especially in the Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

Decades of forced integration by suppression and tight control were not enough to transform a conglomerate of peoples, belonging to different civilizations, religions and races, into a civil society of the American type. The political system broke up and the “Soviet people” proved to be no more than an amalgamation of societies.

II. Dynamic Characteristics of Geo-Cultural Identity of the Central Asia

1. The Synthesis of Nomadic and Sedentary Life

The Eurasian world was divided into two major economic systems which were the sedentary-agrarian and pastoral nomadic. Sedentary society in the Central Asia was largely confined to the south-eastern area which, however, steadily encroached on the steppe pasturages and the urban oasis-based societies perched on the southern rim of the Central Asia.

Pastoral nomadism is a system that must interact with other cultures and economies. Pastoral production is capable of creating great individual wealth, but it cannot generate the great quantity and variety of foodstuffs that sedentary society does. Hence, it cannot support as large a

population.²¹ Although sedentary and nomad alike faced the uncertainties of nature and man, nomadism was by far the more precarious system. A disturbance caused by epizooties, pastoral overproduction or raids could have far-reaching consequences in the steppe, brining about the migration of tribes in search of new pasturages of the assaults of half-starved raiding parties on agrarian communities.

In short, it resulted in war and conquest.²² Nomadism was merciless to those who could not maintain the minimum herd necessary for survival – usually 60-100 head of sheep, horses, cattle, goats and camels with sheep and horses predominant. Those who could not find relatives willing or able to help them rebuild or even to hire them as herdmen, were often forced to sedentarize.²³ Such nomads became willing members predatory bands that raided nomad and sedentary alike. Desperate men formed the nucleus of the comitatus that future conquerors gathered. The nomad with his highly developed equestrian skills was a redoubtable and feared warrior.²⁴ These skills were exploited by both nomadic and sedentary societies. Some nomadic groups or individuals took service with surrounding sedentary states as allies – often marital alliances were part of this relationship, mercenaries or slave soldiers – the gulams and mamluks of the Muslim world. Whatever the term or relationship, each of the sedentary states ringing the Eurasian steppes, had such units.

On the other hand, about the Turkic nomadic world of the medieval Central Asia, because our sources are merged and largely written from the perspective of hostile sedentary societies, the formation and decomposition of geo-cultural polities is only imperfectly reflected.

Nomadic-sedentary interaction ranged over a broad spectrum of relationships, peaceful and hostile, depending on the political and economic needs of the two societies at a given time. Certainly, the

²¹ Khazanov, *Nomads*, pp. 70-72, 81-83

²² *Ibid*, pp. 69-72, 78-81

²³ Barth, *Nomads*, pp.16-17, 108-109

²⁴ Sinor 1981: 134-135

traditional image of the Eurasian Turkic or Mongolian nomads as conquerors and despoilers is grossly exaggerated. Indeed over the course of history, the nomad has been as much put upon as his sedentary neighbor. In the Modern Era, it is the nomad who has suffered the greatest losses. A variety of explanations have been offered regarding the causes of nomadic irruptions into the sedentary world, e.g., dessication of pasturages, the greed of the barbarian for the goods of civilized society,²⁵ the need to interact economically with sedentary society.

A major turning point in human socio-cultural evolution was the movement from primitive to advanced complex society. The Turkic nomadic socio-cultural polities in the medieval period can best be described as moving between degrees of primitive and advanced complex forms of organization which we may term traditional tribal confederated society and traditional early state society. The former were, in theory, egalitarian societies that had little or no formal government. The primary sources of social cohesion were found in the requirements of kinship and its obligations, tribal custom and the needs of a nomadic economy which demanded some degree of cooperation. As is well known, there was a strong political component in kinship in the Altaic nomadic society in Inner Asia.²⁶

Such a grouping, barely governing itself, was by definition incapable of governing others and hence could not subjugate them. Complex society is characterized by the development of central executive institutions -chieftainship and monarchy - which created sources of social cohesion beyond the kinship system, the state.

When the political bonds of nomadic states dissolved, their constituent members often reverted to some less advanced variant of complex or traditional early state society or even to a form of traditional stateless society. Statehood was not a natural or even necessary condition for nomadic society.

On the other hand, on the basis of the major ecological division of the Central Asia, the area is subdivided into two zones, northern

²⁵ Jagchid 1989: 2

²⁶ Bates 1973: 55-56

steppe and southern, sedentary part. The term sedentary means that this zone was dominated by sedentary civilization, although it includes also large areas of deserts and steppes, and nomads were present there sometimes in large numbers. The dividing line between the two parts of Central Asia goes roughly from the Aral Sea along the northern limits of the Syr Darya basin and the Tien Shan.

The two zones together form a frontier area of two Eurasian civilizations; Islamic-Iranian sedentary and inner Asian nomadic. Culturally the Central Asia belongs to both of them. In their political history, nomadic and sedentary zones of Central Asia had one common feature, a lack of political centralization, which also made them different, Iran on the one hand and the eastern steppes of inner Asia on the other hand. The sedentary zone of the Central Asia did not directly belong to the imperial tradition of Iran, and the nomads of Dashti Qipchaq did not much share the imperial tradition of the nomads of East Asia. Both zones tended to remain politically fragmented, and the temporary centralization which they from time to time experienced was brought by the conquerors from the outside: Persians and Arabs from the south, eastern Turks and Mongols from the east, and finally Russians and Chinese. This land has been indeed continuously invaded or occupied by the neighboring imperial powers. Among these foreigners, Turks was the most influencing powers who had totally restructured the region, enormously affecting the history of the land, combining nomadic and sedentary world.

The penetration and occupation of Turks into the sedentary part of the Central Asia was accompanied by Turkification especially in linguistic sense. The Turkic speaking population grew at the expense of the Iranian speakers owing to an influx of Turks from the steppe belt as well as their higher rate of growth and to the use of Turkic languages by increasing numbers of the indigenous population.

At the beginning of the Islamic period in the 8th century, the Central Asia was still roughly divided into well defined linguistic zones; Turkic which included all of the northern steppe regions of nomadic culture, and Iranian which included the regions of sedentary culture. In border areas, mainly the Syr Darya basin, including the eastern part of the Ferghana valley, some linguistically mixed groups probably existed.

The main exceptions to this general division were these: Some Turkic speaking groups were Afghan Turkistan –Tocharistan- and to the north of the Gorgan –Dehistan- by the end of the 6th or 7th century, and in Eastern Turkistan at least by the 6th century. On the other hand, Sogdian colonies were dispersed far into the inner Asian steppes, reaching northern China. Turkic speaking people groups were among the principle adversaries of the Arabs in Transoxiana and Khorsan in the 7th and 8th centuries. However, it is uncertain how numerous and important the Turks in the sedentary regions of the Central Asia were before they began their major migrations to the south-west.²⁷

The result of this process can be seen today; according to the 1979 population statistics, about 89percent of the total Asian or indigenous population of the Central Asia or the Soviet Central Asia were registered as speakers of various Turkic languages and only 11 percent as Persian Tajik speakers.

2. The Cross-Center of the World Civilizations

The cultural role of the Inner Asian nomads in the history of the Central Asia is also rather ambivalent. One aspect of it, their role as intermediaries between the great sedentary civilizations of Eurasia, is well known and examined in scholarly literatures. It is often assumed that the formation of nomadic empires which partially included areas of ancient sedentary civilizations was even more favorable for promoting cultural exchange and, therefore, for the general development of culture. It was one of Barthold's favorite ideas that the emergence of the Mongol Empire, which for the first and only time in history included centuries of both East Asian and West Asian civilizations, allowed an exchange of goods and ideas on a scale unheard of before and therefore contributed to the expansion of cultural horizons and the flourishing of culture.²⁸

It is ironic that, despite untold massacres carried out by the Mongols and the destruction of entire cities, Chingis Khan was a strong

²⁷ Bregel 1991: 55

²⁸ Bregel 1980: 388

protector of not only trade and the Silk Road but also cultural exchange between Europe and China across Central Asia. During his lifetime, under a *pax mongolica* merchants could travel from Korea to the Crimea in absolute security, not least because entire populations had been decimated along the way.

The last great explosion out of the Central Asia was to be perhaps the most important and lasting cultural influence in the region by Timur or Tamerlane. Born south of Samarkand among the Barlas Turks, Timur captured most of Turkistan by 1380 and moved south to Persia and India, west to Russia, and eastward to China. In 1393 he captured Baghdad. Two years later he took Moscow. As he conquered he moved the cream of the vanquished region's scholars and craftsmen to Samarkand, where he began to build the grandest capital of medieval Asia. Timur established the Timurid dynasty, and his grandson Ulugh Beg continued his artistic and intellectual traditions, turning Samarkand and Bukhara into the seat of all learning in the decorative arts, architecture, poetry, philosophy, painting and astronomy.

Since the Turks settled down in Central Asia and the West Asia, they were significantly influenced by the Western and Middle Eastern civilization. As the result, many oasis-statelets in history were the outermost cultural and often political extensions of the great imperial structures of the Mediterranean world: Roman-Byzantine, Iranian, Arabo-Islamic, with the full panoply of religious and cultural influences that those variants of Mediterranean civilization entailed, i.e., monotheistic religions. Matching these western influences were the powerful currents emanating from the China and the Indian subcontinent, civilizations that have put their permanent stamp on East and southeast Asian society.

It is in this geo-cultural milieu, in this historical and cultural context of the interaction of nomad and sedentary, steppe and sown, that the genesis of the peoples of the Central Asia took place.

In the Pre-Modern Era, the steppes and the Silk Road of the Central Asia served as one of the major crossroads of the world civilizations. Peoples, goods and religions traversed vast Eurasia with remarkable rapidity through the Central Asia.

IV. Conclusion

It is well known that the republics in the former Soviet Central Asia are artificial entities. Thus it is different to define a clear-cut ethnic and national identity of each, despite the Soviet-made Uzbekness, Kazakhness, Tajikness, etc. Geo-culture of these republics and the ethnic mixture of each also give different colors to the religious preferences in the area. Some of the Central Asian states are considered to be multi-religious, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and some as mono-religious, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

The future path of the Central Asian states will be very closely related to the definition of the following matters, their religion, national or ethnic identity and the type of leadership in the area. There are many questions regarding their religion Islam and their ethnic identity as Turkic people. Although all the four except Kazakhstan has no problem in giving Islam a special status, there is still hesitancy in displaying full support in the public and political life of these countries. In other words, these countries are very careful not to be labelled by others as fundamentalist countries. As Turkic peoples, they also face with the possibility of being labelled as Pan-Turkists.²⁹ At the present, the leaders of the Central Asian countries are very careful and moderate in their policy towards both Islam and their ethnic origin.

However, when we consider the geocultural identity of the Central Asia which has been formed through long history, in spite of the strong globalization wave driven by the capitalist super powers, both Turkicness and Muslimness will not be easily challenged. Both Turkicness of the nomadic Altaic tradition or spirit and Muslimness of the Persian-Turk Islamic tradition will remain as the two main pillars of the fundamental geocultural common elements of the Central Asian states for the time being. For as very closely related with the Central Asian's proto-national feeling, these are vitally important in the nation building process of the Central Asian states.

²⁹ Kırımli 1995: 30-31

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