

THE STEPPE : SPACE OF DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES. KAZAKHSTAN FOR EXAMPLE

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Why Kazakhstan? Because I had the privilege to have organized and lead on October 1991; the first linkage between a group of French students and the Institute of pedagogical for stranger languages (the name at this period), in Alma Ata, at a decisive moment for the republics which composed the last URSS at the moment of blowing up.

Why the steppe? Because , with The president of Burgundy University in Dijon, we were officially invited at the occasion of international colloquy for the 150th anniversary of Abaï Kounanbaïouly , and we were really fascinated by the steppic space, waving between Semey and Karaul, at the north of Kazakhstan .At this occasion, on August 1995, I had the great pleasure to see again the Professor Zhabaykhan Abdildin , after the first meeting with him in my town during the visit I organized for the Kazakhstani delegation in the Fontainebleau castle.

If we observe Eurasia map , the steppe lies down boundless, attractive, fascinating.

Open space for historical riding without important obstacles which gave to nomad riders a strategic advantage on sedentary peoples before XVIth century during several centuries. These nomad peoples created a special type of life with the feelings of strength, violence, sometimes, and sense of courage and fidelity, without forgetting a world vision where, as Pr. Abdildin wrote: “Man is not perceptible out of the unity with the nature..”.

The territory of actual Kazakhstan , in the earth of steppe world was the obligatory place for crossing over, to human groups who ventured between Altaï borders and Tian- chan in the east and Caspian sea in the west, in divergences which existed until XXth century to occupy the space or master it and thus to converge often in equivocal meetings a really dialectic situation, as likes P. Abdildin !

I propose to follow this plan:

1) First, see that steppic space in Kazakhstan permitted divergences during History.

2) Nevertheless, the fascination for this space favorised several convergences.

3) It is necessary to insist at last on the fact that the steppe in Kazakhstan was a constantly a space to master.

A Chinese proverb says that “ nomads follow grass and water”, so in Kazakhstan ,the steppe which spreads from aralo- Caspian depression in the west to the border with China in the east , offered in several proportions, grass and water to the numerous peoples who during long periods diverged on this territory . They follow three biogeographic zones, oriented North –south:

To the north , near Siberia and Oral, the brought land into cultivation , shows brown grounds which permit cultivations.

In the center the typical steppe is dominating: just at the beginning of spring it is the domain of graminaceas, here the human presence is light and the people had only transited to find favourable places for a long staying. Here also, far from the indiscreet glances and for security reasons, was installed the spatial place of Baikounour after the 2nd world war.

In the south, near Syr Daria, or near the feet of Tian-Chan and Alataou , the millenary oasis had hold some sedentary peoples in particular round Otrar where flight the shadow of Timur, or Turkestan , high place for Islam , here was erected the fantastic mausoleum of Khodja Akhmed Yasawi in XVIth century.

1) So, till many centuries, the steppe in actual Kazakhstan was a space of divergences.

It is through these territories swept by winds the successive invasions went away like shock waves pushing themselves. For example Turkish oghouzs in Xth century jostling before them Petchenegues tribes and themselves pushing Hungaries to central Europe It was a genuine periodic rush for nomads to find hospitable lands propitious for cattle.

Fantastic ridings for peoples whose natural conditions of surrounding environment and necessary adaptations to survive, obliged to predatory , to glorify the courage and audacity , but also violence often without pity. This genuine “Steppe world” to take again a famous expression , went from VIII th century to VIII th chiefly to East to West:

From Scythian confederations to hunnic tribes and with Karluks , the territory of actual Kazakhstan became a space of turcic peoples concentrations before their divergences in the whole space opened before them and chiefly before arrival of gengikhanid Mongols (those called by the French historian, René Grousset: “The steppe made man”) till XIIth century in the creation of the vastest empire in the world from China to Europe .

Then, from XVth divergences movements were going to curve from west to east when European kingdoms mastered oriental assailants. At this moment, the colonial Russian thrusts goes through the steppe and will be so active in XVIIIth that kazakhs themselves will incite the help against the fearful incursions of Oïrats and Djoungars against their territory.

Two lines of strengthened posts to protect Russian garrisons were built to occupy and survey the large steppic space, one on the north from Omsk to Semipalatinsk on XVIIIth century and the other on south, along the Syr Daria river to Vierny (ancient Almaty) on XIXth.

Here began a new history in Kazakh steppe, because this boundless territory became a sort of noman’s land : an embossing space for the exclu and indésirable persons from czarist regime on XIXth, like Dostoïevski or Michaelis, or on XXth “punished peoples” to take historian Alexandre Nekritch’s expression. Because these peoples were suspected to not obey to stalinian authorities : for example in 1941 the “Germans of Volga” whose ancestors lived near Volga river till two centuries before and in 1944, the Meshkets turcs, who were deported in quantity to Kazakhstan .

2) Nevertheless if steppe in Kazakhstan was theatre of divergences, it was also a convergence space.

Yes, because this space made during centuries a real fascination and the desire to discover its mysteries constantly, pushed persons with an adventured mind to explore the space corresponding to those of actual Kazakhstan.

So, already on IVth century before present, Alexander’s greek ahead troops made a stop here before going to Indus .Later on XIIIth thank to the peace given by dominating Mongols on Djagataï khanats and golden Horde, messengers of emperor of China, went to west with their oriental manner of life. They were Chang Chan who,

between 1219 and 1222 travelled from Khambalik to Samarkande , in passing by Ili river on south of actual Kazakhstan and who were fascinated by the horses of Ferghana who he said: “ they sweat blood and are the descendants of heavenly “toulpars””, or more audacious again, the Nestorian Christian Rabban Sauma , messenger of emperor Kubilāi on 1275 for linking Christian kings against arab caliphs He went away from Peking , passing by Issyk Koul and followed a way to Genova and Paris !

During XIIIth also, Great European lands had “Oriental politics” as said Bertold Spuler(on XIXth), to find economical, religious and political links. So on 1245 Plan Carpin from the kingdom of France went to Karakorum passing by Otrar, and some years after; G.de Rubrouck sent by the French king Louis IX (St Louis) followed the same way.

Discovers and diplomatic missions were also the preoccupations of the arab traveller Ibn Battuta on XIVth , and the adventurous convergences were stopping from XVth to XVIIIth, but they became again strongly on XIXth when Europe spread its strength and its curiosity on Central Asia, as this one of Eugene Schuyler about 1873. At least it is necessary to consider that on XXth many adventurous trips like “yellow cruiser” on years 1930 and nearer the “rallye Paris-Pekin “passing by the actual Kazakhstan on 1992, or Paris –Moscou-Oulan Bator on 1996, in passing by the Kazakh steppe, all are the proof of a real desire of adventure and convergences euro-asiatic.

During ancient centuries, these ways were followed from west by religious men wanting escape persecutions : Buddhists, Nestorians, and from the VIIth by muslim preachers. Therefore Central Asia was a religious syncretism territory between buddhism, chamanism and from the XIIth it received the important influence of Sufism.

Musical styles, dances with famous artists, were exchanged. So, sogdians actors presented choreographies in China and Chinese tumblers went to Byzance on XIth . So, great floods of convergences on “Silk Road” made a main line of relations between nomad world and sedentary world: thus, Kazakhstan was, in particular, as the French historian Vincent Fourniau wrote : ”Space of concentration between turkish nomads and Persian sedentaries from Xth to XIIth”.

Relations between European and Asiatic civilizations were favoured and permitted unforeseen tolerances , so on XIIIth Sufism poet Djalalidin Rumi could exclaim: “Often a Turkish or in Indian man understands better themselves than two turkishes who cannot find a common language”.

Cultural and artistic convergences all these links were not made only in the serenity, because it is necessary now to evocate half -forced or forced convergences in the Kazakh steppe:

On XVth and XVIth to obtain a more coherent mastership of steppic space Kazakh tribes in the north of Syr Daria river under the impulse of khans Baranduk and Kasim, detached themselves from ouzbek tribes installed on the south of Syr Daria and created three hordes . They stayed united under the direction of only one khan till XVIIIth. but at this period their independence gradually disappeared under the pressure of djoungars , chineses and Russians. These one repressed several revolts in particular those of Srim Datov in XVIII th century and Kenesary Kasimov between 1837 and 1846.

These fierce pacification permitted to czarist power to spread its colonization thank to the law on the ground on July 1889 and the statut on 1891: these two decisions

offered 15(deciatins (about 16 hectares) to the peasant families who accepted to go from west to east of Russia.

All these measures permitted installation of more one millions of Russians and other Slavic peoples to the prejudice of Kazakh nomads who lost spaces absolutely useful for their flocks .(The total percentage of Kazakh population in the steppe was 80% in 1897 and 60% in 1911).

At these half-forced convergences of no Asiatic populations added forced convergences under soviet period: To spread bolchevik influences in the east (Stalin said: “Turkestan is the most important of soviet republics to bring revolution in Orient”. “To clean Kazakh villages with the october broom”, as Golochtchikine said..) . So sedentariness of nomads was accelerated and the demographic consequences terrible: about 5 millions Kazakh peoples in 1926, about 3millions in 1939. With that the huge exodus of populations from east during 2nd world war (“punished peoples”), so at the moment of independence only 40% of Kazakhs in new Kazakhstan ; exceptional situation in the whole ex- URSS !

3) Finally, divergences, convergences, all these floods in this largespacewere made with the obsession to go through and shorten the distances to master better them and to find the solution for avoid the enclavement . So when appear at the end of XIXth the new “fire horses” these one become the ideal instrument to conquest steppic space.

The first stage for trying to cross rule the Kazakh territory by an iron way, began on 1888 with the “transcaspian” till Samarkand with a west-east direction , and on 1906 with the “transaralian” from Orenbourg to Tachkent . Under soviet period the main iron way of “turksib” on 1932, enclosed the steppe in south from Tachkent and Alma Ata and by Semipalatinsk, farer on north, join the “transsiberian”.

The year 1991 opened Kazakhstan on the world! Now all decisions to profit of this new situation is to create several ways of transport to disenclave the land:

- New roads with Europe;
- New iron lines with China en central Asia.
- Creation of flying lines with Europe and Asia;

All these news are encouraged by the adhesion of the Land to all the great international organizations.

To conclude, say that, as long as the Kazakhstan space was a spot of instability or a economical and political set-off, it was space of divergences. Then progressively, it became a space of convergences and to day , with installation of a young and respected land in the world , it is considered as a model of tolerance between peoples and a hyphen between central Asia peoples, thank to its history, often painful, and its experience, its large steppic space and the wealth of its under -ground offer new possibilities of convergences.

So, now as PR; Zhabaykhan Abdildin recalled in writing about many epic heroes like Korkut Ata, who “ found immortality way”, the Republic of Kazakhstan , now can freely learn to the world its whole and really ancient and famous culture, in which Abai’s thinks or the deeds of Koblandy, or Alpamys batyrs, can be exalted.

A Kazakh proverb says that : “The horse and the dombra melodie are the two wings of Kazakh..”, so, add that a harmonious mastered steppe thank to the winged steamer and informatic horses of to day and hymns to ethnics convergences are the two challenges of Kazakhstan: Good luck to it!