



The Word in the Ruins

by Christopher Schwartz - 17.09.2012

“Poetry is the queen of language, the sovereign of the word. [...] Language has free will in it and it warms the heart with the roundness and perfection of its form.” So says Abai Qunanbaiuli, perhaps the most well-known of the nineteenth century Central Asian men of letters.

This epigram is taken from his *Qara Sözder*, a diary reminiscent of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and written in the waning days of the nineteenth century. The book gives us an idea about the perception, the experience, of the word for a Central Asian, as something articulated and performed, not just passively read. In other words, literature is alive; perhaps even: the literary is life.

In one sense, life as the inner theater of history. In Qunanbaiuli's era, Kazakh society was undergoing sweeping and often violent changes wrought by Tsarist colonization. Qunanbaiuli himself was a handmaiden of this upheaval, advocating limited Russification as a strategy toward Kazakh modernization and cultural revival. The *Qara Sözder* is thus a record of how its author struggled with the dialectic between modernity and tradition, not only as it unfolded in society, but also within the self.

A sense of ruination pervades the text, i.e., of a society in rapid decay and decline; coupled with it, though, is also a sense of re-building. Qunanbaiuli writes, “The words were born again; listener, renew yourself.” He is giving voice to a rather existentialist notion: living is about crafting a narrative out of the ink of flesh, decision and memory. It is also an Islamic sentiment, rooted from the Qur’án – that ultimate of poems, the Most Living Word – in the soil of Central Asia history.

The Unity of the Land

Olivier Roy's *The New Central Asia*, although published in 1997 and a bit dusty by now (it has been revised in 2000 and 2007), is still one of the best written introductions to the region, covering its development over the last two centuries. In my interpretation, it is fundamentally the story of how the thing in Islamic theology called *tawhíd* – unity – can be found in just about every respect: the partition of the land and its people into modern nation-states, and the prices paid to achieve this.

Roy suggests we think of Central Asia “in its broadest sense [as] the area of Turco-Persian civilisation which was the crucible of languages and cultures from Istanbul to Delhi, from Esfahan to Bukhara.”

However: “This was an area of transitions. There were hardly any rigidly defined frontiers until the nation-states of the twentieth century solidified minor differences into a principle of exclusion” – the principle of exclusion against each other was a novel concept to the region and its inhabitants

Indeed, consider: of the five Central Asian countries today, two are totalitarian dictatorships (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), one a “managed democracy” (Kazakhstan), one a parliamentary republic (Kyrgyzstan), another a presidential republic (Tajikistan). They share a cultural patrimony, two major river basins, and plenty of heroes and horseback and yet none of them get along with each other. What happened?

The Fault-Lines Beneath the Land

Prior to the nineteenth century, there were two broad fault-lines that divided this region's demographics: a nomadism vs. sedentarism divide in culture and a Turkic vs. Farsic cleavage of the tongue. Today, many say these fault-lines can still be seen in the rivalries between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, albeit filtered through the problematic geographical legacies of Soviet central planning such as when Uzbekistan unilaterally annexed border territory from Kyrgyzstan that had been in disputed status as far back as 1924. This fault-line has periodically exploded, especially in the Ferghana Valley, where the two peoples rub shoulder to shoulder (cf. this timeline: 6/1990, 3/1991, 2-3/1995, 2-3/1999; and this report on inter-ethnic riots in Osh).

The Kyrgyz were a largely nomadic people until the Tsarist-Soviet incursion. Their most significant contribution to literature is the monumental *Manas Epic*. To this day, the Kyrgyz delight in public performances by *man-saschis*, oralists who recount the exploits of the epic's namesake, a legendary warrior who united their ancestors. Not surprisingly, their relationships with settled populations, recorded in historical records and legends like *Manas*, were complex and rife with violent raids.

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The Uzbeks, meanwhile, are claimants to the trappings of civilization. These are the descendants of Tamerlane – world conqueror, destroyer and builder of cities, and patron of the arts, not to mention muse to Anglophone writers ranging from Christopher Marlowe to Edgar Allan Poe – and Omar Khayyam, whose Rubaiyyat has been translated and re-translated and re-re-translated in the Latin world for generations. The Uzbek literary tradition is alive and well today. Two examples: loyal readers of BBC Online are no doubt familiar with the novelist Hamid Ismailov, and in human rights circles, the persecuted poet Yusuf Juma is lionized for the way in which he has deployed his most ancient of literary forms as a modern tool for justice against one of the world's most corrupt and violent regimes.

However, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek dynamic is an old fault-line. After 1854, we must think in less dialectical terms. As Russia, China and America enter the region, they bring within them Christianity, Tsarism, Confucianism, Communism, Liberalism, Democracy, and most of all, Nationalism.

Phenomenology of the Steppe

Imagine if, instead of dying in 1904, Qunanbaiuli time-traveled to today. It would be a bewildering experience for him, even more than if, say, his contemporary (and literary kindred spirit) Walt Whitman made the leap in the United States. The reason is because between then and now two entire Lebenswelten have passed – the Tsarist and the Soviet. In 1904, demonyms like “Kyrgyz”, “Uzbek” and “Tajik” were murky, often indicating peoples different from those we now associate with those names. Cities like Andijan, Bukhara, Merv, Khiva, Kokand, Osh, Samarkand, Tashkent had been to one degree or another sovereign states with long-established histories and traditions – who were young Almaty, Ashgabat, Astana, Dushanbe, Bishkek compared to these stately matrons? Mere Russian garrisons, mud forts or hamlets with barely any paved roads to their names.

Qunanbaiuli's Steppe was already urbanizing – throughout the Qara Sözder there is as much trepidation over the future as its exaltation – but even so, it was still thoroughly a pastoral region. However, in only two generations, Soviet collectivization and industrialization obliterated the nomadic way of life. That obliteration is

still felt, though, generations later, and it is in that feeling that we can get a sense of Central Asia's unique *de vivre littéralement*.

A few years ago, on the blogging website I head up, NewEurasia Citizen Media, a young Kazakh named Ozgecan wrote a poem yearning for a life that not even his grandparents could fully remember:

May I please go back in time?
I don't want this industrial world anymore
where everything is measured in minutes and dollars.
Please let me go back in time
where my ancestors were warriors
bareback on wild horses
where horses were spirits
spirits of bravery and freedom
where no car could wake me from my undisturbed sleep.
[...] I beg you: Let me go back in time
to see the green blanket of nature spread itself in front of me
like an eternal sea wherein waves never touch a coast
and you cry: 'All this space! All this space!'

Think for a moment about Ozgecan's use of the Time motif as a where, a place, a space: this is the nomad's perspective. And it points to a broader phenomenology of the Steppe, wherein existence is experienced as a visceral unitary whole in which sacred and secular, inner and outer are one, a single horizon that always rises ahead of you, beckoning you. It is, in essence, a vision of *tawhíd*.

The Heresy of History

However, *tawhíd* is not only a vision of intrinsic unity; it can also indicate something to be achieved, and very often in the Qur'án, something to be re-achieved. Yet, aspiration is also tinged by the lack of something, even the haunting by something lost. In Islamic theology, the loss of unity is caused by *ghaffah* – literally, “distracted”, “drowsiness”, but more fundamentally, forgetfulness (such as from the *dhikr*, or remembrance, of God).

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Its most salient symptom is fitnah, a word which has traditionally connoted “civil war” but which fundamentally means upheaval, secession, chaos, and finally, ruination. In many respects, then, it is the antipode of tawhíd, condition of disunity; so, too, the káfir (the hider, the amnesiac, the disbeliever) vis-à-vis the muslim (the one who submits, the one who remembers).

We can hear the lamentation over ghafflah in Ozgecan, but also in another author, Chingiz Aitmatov of Kyrgyzstan. In his novel, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (И дольше века длится день), we read about a railroad worker's struggle to bury a deceased friend, a struggle backlit by the Soviet space program, which was based in the Steppe. Aitmatov uses the motif of the mankurt (“manwolf”), an ancient, possibly pre-Islamic Turkic legend of a captive man who has his head wrapped in a camel hide and is then subsequently left exposed to the sun for several days. The hide shrinks and presses down on his skull until his brain is crushed, thereby destroying his memory and ability to think and rendering him an ideal slave. It is a disturbing metaphor for the Central Asian experience of Communism: the innermost effect of ghafflah, the forced transformation into a servant of fitnah.

For many Central Asians, fitnah has been carved into the very cartography of the region. The Soviets designed the borders, infrastructure, even those to whom they granted “nation” status, at least in part to exploit old rivalries, engineer new ones, and generally keep the Central Asians dependent upon Moscow to prevent (what eventually proved to be) the unpreventable: independence. The Uzbeks are a case in point, as sizable populations of them exist in all of their neighboring countries, especially Kyrgyzstan, well outside “their own” walked-off patrimony. From an Islamic viewpoint, then, history brought about the most wretched of heresies.

However, heresy's blighted fruits were not uniform. While Uzbeks perhaps succeeded in coping with Communism without too much fear of losing their sense of self, the Kyrgyz were deeply ambivalent, enjoying the material benefits of the Soviet Union yet feeling at the same time ruined by them – hence Aitmatov's mankurt.

Who is the True Muslim?

Since the collapse of Communism, the mankurt motif has transformed into a polemical device used by many Kyrgyz nationalists in their newspaper editorials, speeches and blog posts against the many of the Russified middle-class of their country. For example, Aitmatov's own daughter, Shirin, a member of the Kyrgyzstani parliament who has defended the rights of ethnic minorities in her country, particularly the Uzbeks, has been denounced as “mankurt #1”.

The mankurt's relationship to dhikr and ghafflah thus appears complex and unpleasant. What was lost (an original unity and purity of national self) has this condition because it was forcibly forgotten. Hence, in order to regain it, the question becomes whether another enforced amnesia is required. If one “reads” closely, this dialectic is what underlies ongoing calls in Kyrgyzstan to “Kyrgyzify” and exile its Uzbek minority – and thus why someone like Shirin would be seen as “betraying” her father.

Liberals like Shirin counter this discourse with what is essentially an existentialist dhikr, of a Kyrgyz-stani tawhíd predicated upon a common history of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks experienced together, a narrative that does not revolt against the Soviet past as only repression, but embraces and transforms it as creation. Indeed, the real mankurt, they say, are the revisionist nationalists, who long for one amnesia over another; the mankurt is, then, the káfir, who has internalized fitnah and (unknowingly) seeks its return. The real Muslim, by contrast, is he who, as the Arabic etymology suggests, submits to the past, thereby allowing it to transform him into something new, something better.

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The Freedom of Sorrow

The literary is indeed life in Central Asia, as motif, phenomenology, the scriptural and the political all merge. The tawhíd-fitnah dynamic is all-pervading – and with it, I believe, lamentation, that feeling of ruin, ugliness, and pessimism. It is perhaps even the central theme in Central Asian literature, seeping into the very ink of every word. It is, again, simultaneously very existentialist and very Islamic. It is the crying out for jannah – literally, “the garden”, heaven, redemption. It is crying out for the transcendent Steppe that is beyond sully.

Yet, lamentation also seems to offer a kind of inner resilience, even an inner sovereignty, against the crumbling ruins outside. One last time, consider Qunanbaiuli, who begins his Qara Sözder with these despairing yet defiant words:

“Whether for good or ill, I have lived my life, traveling a long road fraught with struggles and quarrels, disputes and arguments, suffering and anxiety, and reached these advanced years to find myself at the end of my tether, tired of everything. I have realized the vanity and futility of my labors and the meanness of my existence. What shall I occupy myself with now and how shall I live out the rest of my days? I am puzzled that I can find no answer to this question. [...] I have decided at length: henceforth, pen and paper shall be my only solace, and I shall set down my thoughts. Should anyone find something useful here, let him copy it down or memorize it. And if no one has any need of my words, they will remain with me anyway.” ❁