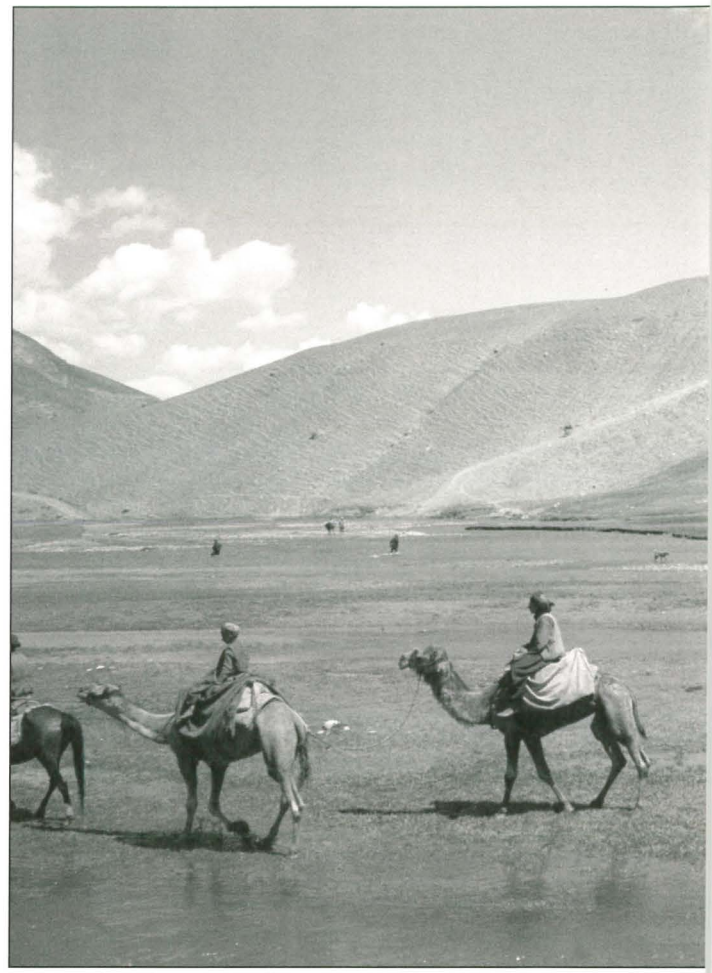
Nomads

by Alma Kunanbay

Nomads and nomadism have been intimately linked to Silk Road trade and culture since ancient times ("nomad" derives from Greek *nomos*, "pasture"), and, at the debut of the 21st century, still constitute a vital if all too often endangered economic and social force in large parts of Inner Eurasia. From Siberian reindeer herders and Mongolian horse breeders to Turkmen shepherds and Tibetan yak drivers, modern-day pastoralists preserve a way of life that embodies some of the Silk Road region's most time-tested and ingenious traditions.



Marking the frontiers of the great civilizations of China, Iran, India, and Greece, the historical borders of the nomadic world have been indefinite and diffuse. Nomads and settled peoples have long existed in a complementary relationship, and in the history of trans-Eurasian trade and cultural exchange, nomads have been like blood vessels that circulated the oxygen of ideas and distributed new technologies and products along the Silk Road. In particular, nomads provided temporary accommodation and security, stabling and fodder for the animals of merchants and blacksmiths for making horseshoes, kept vitally important wells, established markets for the exchange of goods — that is, everything without which international trade along such a huge road would not have survived long. Nomads can be proud of their historical achievements, which include movable dwellings, clothing suitable for riding horseback, felt and leather utensils, and the equine harness. They invented *kumiss* (fermented mare's milk), the art of hunting with birds of prey, and bowed stringed instruments that are the ancestors of the cello and violin.

Nomadism on the steppes of Eurasia is thought to have originated around 3,000 years ago. It was not, however, the first source of human livelihood on the steppes. Archaeological evidence shows that migratory herding had been preceded by a complex livestock-raising and agricultural economy. Nomadism arose in response to ecological and climatic factors: first and foremost, inadequate food and water resources, which led people to depend increasingly on hunting. They then began to migrate in pursuit of the animals they hunted, following the seasonal migrations of wild mammals in Eurasia's arid steppe zone. In turn, selective breeding created an ecological niche that favored domesticated animals over their wild counterparts.

Present-day nomadic groups — Buryats, Kalmyks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Mongols, Turkmens, and Yakuts, to name a few — practice diverse types of stockbreeding and patterns of migration, belong to different religions, and speak different languages. At root, however, they represent two distinct linguistic groups, Turkic and Mongolian, and this binary distinction resonates in other aspects of nomadic culture. For example, the dwellings of Turkic nomads have spherical roofs, while those of Mongolian groups have conic roofs. Turkic nomads orient the entrance of their dwelling to the east, while among Mongolians, the entrance always faces south. Turkic nomads wear soft footwear, drink clear tea, and slaughter sheep in a way that drains away the blood; Mongolian nomads wear hard footwear, drink tea mixed with milk, butter, salt, and flour, and slaughter sheep in such a way as to preserve the blood (which is made into blood sausage).

Nomad civilization has its own laws governing the organization of time and space, and nomads follow very sensitively the cycles of nature. In the words of one song, they are in continual pursuit of eternal spring. The primacy of movement serves as the basis of the nomads' entire worldview. For them, everything that is alive is in movement, and everything that moves is alive: the sun and moon, water and wind, birds, and animals.

The low fertility of the soil does not allow nomads and their herds to stay in any one area for a long time. Overgrazing can have dire results — at the extreme, removing a pasturage from economic use for a period of years. In order to maximize the yield of a pasturage, nomads have to judge precisely when to drive their

herds from one pasture to the next, leaving the abandoned area to rejuvenate over the course of a year. Migration with livestock is an unavoidable fact of survival, and during the process of natural and forced selection, sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and horses have been selected for their suitability for lengthy migrations. Indeed, the symbol of nomadism is the horse, whose praise is sung in songs, epic tales, and stories. The winged flying horse, called by various names — e.g., Tulpar, Jonon Khar — like Pegasus of the ancient Greeks, is a beloved character of legends and a source of poetic inspiration.

At the earliest signs of spring, nomads drive their cattle to spring pastures where the animals give birth to their young, and sheep have their spring dip and are shorn. Spring is a time of hope and the beginning of the new cycle of life marked by the observance of the New Year, called Nawruz (in Persian, "new day") among the Turks and Tsagan Sara (literally, "white sacred month") among the Mongols. Without lingering long, nomads drive their animals on to summer pastures, where the happiest time of the nomadic year begins. Summer is a season of fattening for the animals and is characterized by an abundance of food, games and holidays for the young, and meetings with relatives as different migratory paths crisscross. At the same time there are preparations for the hard winter ahead: sewing clothes, weaving rugs, beating felt. With the onset of the first cool days, nomads undertake their migration to fall pastures where they shear sheep and camels, prepare milk and meat for the winter, and return to winter quarters.

Nomads who spend the long winters in lower altitudes in the southern areas of Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, ascend to higher regions in the summer to take advantage of the rich grazing land.

Photo © Ali Naemi, Aga Khan Foundation

This nomadic cycle is not exactly the same each year, for the seasons themselves are not the same from one year to the next. Yet what remains constant for the nomad is the sensation of a natural rhythm of movement, stable forms of social organization, and abiding relationships among people. Success in nomadic life depends on mastery of a vast body of collective knowledge amassed over centuries. This knowledge, passed on from father to son and mother to daughter, embraces an entire complex of tradecraft, domestic know-how, and moral norms.

A nomad's memory preserves thousands of sounds, colors, and smells: the smell of smoke rising from the hearth of a yurt and flatbread frying in fat; of felt and fluffy hides warming from body heat in the cold night; of steppe grasses and flowers in the spring, especially wild tulips and irises; of the bitter dust of fall and the fresh snow of winter. Those smells bring back memories of places where the senses received their first lessons in the never-ending variety of life.

Nomadism would be impossible without transportable dwellings, and among Eurasian nomads, evidence of such dwellings comes from ancient times. Describing the campaign of the Scythians against the Persian armies of Darius in the 5th century B.C.E., the Greek historian Herodotus mentions felt dwellings on carts. Herodotus's observation is echoed in the description of "felt Turkic carts" by Friar Willem van Rubruck, who, as the envoy of Louis IX of France, traveled the Eurasian steppes in 1252–54 on his voyage to Karakorum, then the capital of the Mongol empire. The carts that carried such felt homes were

Nomads Today

Arid zones constitute one-quarter of the earth's surface. With annual precipitation in the range of 200–400 mm, these regions of steppe, desert, semi-desert, and mountains are inhospitable to agriculture, and the only economically viable source of livelihood is nomadic stockbreeding. An estimated 150 million people in more than 30 countries still practice some form of nomadism. An additional 30 million who live in the huge territory of Inner Asia that extends from the west of China almost to the Black Sea can trace their ancestry to nomads who lived as recently as a century or two ago.

Taking a census of nomads is difficult, not only because they do not have addresses and passports, but also because nomadism itself can be transitory. Political turmoil or changes in climate can suddenly sweep masses of sedentary dwellers into a nomadic existence, or the reverse: nomads may be forced by external conditions to adapt to a sedentary life.

The most critical period for nomadism in the Silk Road region has been the last hundred years, when nomads lost their independence and under political pressure from neighboring empires were forced to settle down. Forced settlement threatened their tradition and culture and brought about a decline in their population, yet the spirit of nomadism did not completely disappear. As in the past, nomads demonstrated their ability to adapt and survive. The nomadic worldview became a part of contemporary society. For example, these days traditional yurts or *gers* are found not only in the countryside but in urban centers. In city apartments, the place of honor is opposite the entrance, just as in a yurt. The rituals of nomadic hospitality are alive and well, as is the art of nomadic cuisine. Traditional nomadic dress has influenced modern fashion and preference in fabric colors. Ancient musical instruments are still heard in both traditional and contemporary environments. Authentic folk songs, epics, tales, and legends are widely used as a resource for the creation of new types of music, poetry, theatrical plays, and films, as well as for educational purposes. The essence of nomadic ideas is evident not only in the preservation of folk art but also in modern architecture, design, and literature. At the dawn of the 21st century nomads have much to offer the world at large, and they hope to be received respectfully.

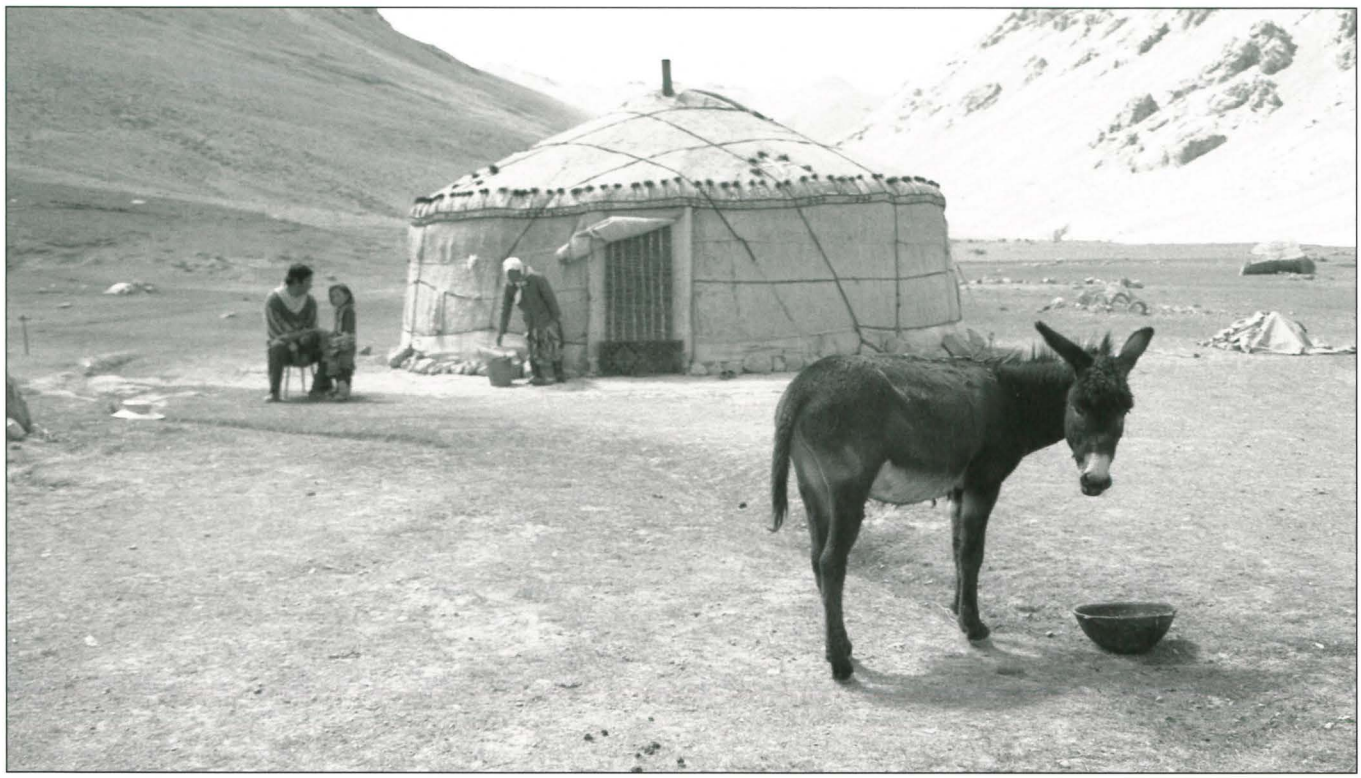
Nomads surround themselves with decorative objects that signify the link between art and life and that are associated with dryness and warmth. These felt straps cover the outside of a yurt in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

30 feet wide and pulled by 33 pairs of oxen. While probably quite comfortable, such structures were cumbersome to transport, and could only be moved at a very slow pace.

The yurt is the universal dwelling of nomads in Inner Eurasia and represents a unique achievement of human genius. As the name of a kind of dwelling, "yurt" entered general usage from Russian. In Central Asia itself "yurt" is a polysemous word that can mean "community," "family," "relatives," "people," "land," or "countryside." Turkic-speaking nomads call their dwellings *kiyiz üy*, "felt home." Mongolian speakers use the term *ger*.

For nomads, the yurt is rich in symbolism that represents both the macrocosmic and microcosmic world. The yurt duplicates the endless hemisphere of the sky, called Tengri, which is also the name of God among nomadic animists, with the round opening of the smoke hole symbolizing the sun. Set on the emerald green grass of a mountain slope, covered with white felt and richly ornamented, the yurt suggests a bird alighting on the slope to rest. At first glance quite simple, the yurt is at the heart of the traditional nomadic worldview. It provides a model and symbol of humanity and the universe, and is the key to understanding nomadic civilization.

Putting together a yurt is a magical act that for nomads represents the original creation: the transformation of Chaos into the Cosmos, Disorder into Order. Conversely, dismantling the yurt creates a reverse transformation. Each step in erecting a yurt has a symbolic meaning, of which participants in the process are keenly aware. Moreover, the yurt has been anthropomorphized so



This traditional yurt in Tajikistan is a nomad's summer home.
Photo © Katherine Hinckley, Aga Khan Foundation

that its parts are described by the same words used to name parts of the human body. For example, the center of the yurt where the hearth is located is known as the "navel"; walls are "thighs"; the interior of the lattice frame is the "womb"; the roof is called "shoulders"; the opening in the smoke hole is an "eye"; the wooden frame is called "bones" or "skeleton," and the felt covering is "clothing." Herders say that each yurt has its own spirit, which is why guests bow their heads and pronounce greetings when entering a yurt, even if no one is home.

The inside of a yurt has a sacred character and is also imbued with its own symbolism. The spot opposite the entrance is the place of honor and is reserved for people who are closer to the Upper World by virtue of their social status, age, or artistic gifts. At the same time, this seat provides a vantage point from which the occupant can view the entire yurt, with men conventionally seated on the right side and women on the left. The spot close to the door is for people considered to be closest to the Lower World, for example, the poor and the sick.

The center or "navel" of the yurt is the hearth, which should never be crossed, even when no fire is burning. Violating this taboo may even be dangerous, as it can evoke retribution from the spirits. The hearth is a sacred territory, the place of fire through which the worldly axis passes as it unites the Upper, Middle, and Lower worlds. It is along this axis that life itself rotates, and, in particular, the life of the inhabitants of the felt dwelling.

In their traditional daily lives, nomads do not know an unadorned space. All of their surroundings, beginning with the internal appointments of the yurt, are adorned or ornamented by their own skilled hands. To "ornament" is to domesticate, to turn an object into a part of one's own cultural universe. Thus everything that is locally produced, from simple household necessities like drinking vessels and blankets to specially crafted items like horse harnesses and jewelry, represents an inviolable link between art and life. Moreover, ornaments are not simply decora-

Nomads herd sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and horses, all animals that can endure long migrations. These sheep herders are from Kazakhstan.
Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

tion, but comprise a special language that is essential knowledge for an understanding of nomadic arts.

From a tactile point of view, all the objects used by nomads in their daily lives exemplify the qualities of dryness and warmth. Leather is warm and dry, as are rugs, textiles, and wood that has been worked. But the warmest of all is felt. One might even ask through what magical process felt preserves its warmth for what seems like thousands of years. A well-dressed felt withstands the merciless ravages of time and provides a link between the nomadic past and nomadic present.

The yurt is not just a place of residence, but a home full of life — a place of daily work and rest, of festivities and holidays, of socializing and taking meals. The nomadic diet is high in protein and consists mostly of meat and milk products. Such food provides the energy people need to engage in hard physical labor and symbolizes not only physical, but also spiritual survival. The daily meal, with its symphony of tastes, customs, and rituals played and replayed in the life of every nomad since childhood, serves as a cornerstone of self-identity, and the shared meal is in its turn at the very epicenter of traditional nomadic culture. The ritual of seating guests around the yurt neatly sums up the social and familial relations of people in any given group, demonstrating hierarchy and priorities.

Nomadic hospitality rituals are strongly regulated; they provide an opportunity to exchange news and for guests — at the

behest of their host — to talk about themselves, their travels, and events in the place where they live. Genealogical ties between hosts and guests are thoroughly discussed, and elders recount historical legends and stories. Among the means of communication particular to life on the steppe is a unique form of transmitting information known as the "long ear": whatever is discussed around the *dastarqan* (tablecloth) can already be known the next day for hundreds of miles around. How, and by what means? Who knows!

Nomadic life is marked by eternal circles — the circle of the sun, the open steppe, the circumference of the yurt, the horned circular scroll of ornaments, the life cycle of the *müshels* or "twelve-year animal cycle." The completion of one circle leads to the beginning of the next, and each moment of transition is consciously and carefully marked by the appropriate customs, rituals, and holidays. One of the turning points is Nawruz, the beginning of the calendar year that occurs on the vernal equinox, March 21–22.

Preparations for Nawruz begin early; homes are cleaned, new clothes are sewn. On the eve of Nawruz, nomads light bonfires and jump over them, young people wander about with lighted torches, women gather to cook large pots of a soup called *sumelak* or *Nawruz kozhe* made of seven ingredients — water, salt, meat, wheat, millet, rice, and milk. Stirring the soup, they sing special songs and pronounce blessings. With the sunrise, they sit down to the first meal of the new year and, as they eat, wish one another a long life. Then they call upon relatives, who await them in their yurts with spreads of delicious food. The holiday continues with horse competitions. At meals, elders are offered a boiled sheep's head, there are songs, and bards engage in verbal dueling competitions. Meanwhile, young people play games like "White Bone," which consists of looking for a sheep's tibia bone that has been thrown into the open steppe — into a magical night full of laughter and freedom under a spring sky filled with stars.

The holiday has provided a short but joyous respite on the path of life, and as it recedes into memory, a new morning arises in the endless steppe, signifying yet another beginning, another rebirth. It is a rebirth in which nomads believe wholeheartedly, a rebirth that carries them through snowstorms and intense heat, losses and disappointments, betrayals and challenges, and all the tests of fate that lead to the future.

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Alma Kunanbay specializes in ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and linguistics. She is the author of more than 30 articles and two books, *The Soul of Kazakhstan* (with photographs by Wayne Eastep) and *Boris Asafyev On Folk Music* (with Izaly Zemtsovsky) and has taught at universities in the United States, Russia, and Kazakhstan. Portions of this article have been adapted from *The Soul of Kazakhstan*.