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Culture Concerned with the Horse as a “Prism” of the Kazakhs’ National Heritage

Abstract: Horse domestication totally changed men’s lives. No other beast from the diverse animal world has played such an important role in the history of civilization as the horse. Kazakhs appeared on the historical stage together with their horses, the horse was always their true friend and protector, who helped them to overcome all difficulties both in the economic challenges of their everyday life - and on the battlefield. While for other peoples horses are just for riding and transport or for sport, for Kazakhs horses are part of their cultural heritage. Studying horses promotes the national consciousness of the Kazakhs, the formation of their cultural image and determines their course for the future. Research into the six-thousand-year history of the Kazakh horse, complete with its historical-ethnographic and cultural implications, makes it possible to throw light on the material and spiritual achievements of the Kazakh nation which would not otherwise be clear. The material and spiritual world of the Kazakhs, their traditions, rituals, customs and world outlook will be discussed here, because all these aspects of traditional culture become clear when considered through the prism of the "horse". The horse provides a special key to understanding the culture of the Kazakhs – a culture of nomads.

Keywords: horse, culture, kumyz, horse color, Kazakh heritage.

The horse played a key role in the life of nomads. Ever since its domestication nomads have eaten horse meat and drunk mare’s milk – kumyz. Archeological and scientific research have proved that nomads were drinking mare’s milk as early as 7000 years ago, as Kazakhs do even nowadays. So we can say that kumyz has a history going back to the V or VI millennium BC. The English scholar Alan K. Outram from the University of Exeter found traces of mare’s milk on clay vessels belonging to the Botai culture. Dr. Outram said, in an interview, that it was not clear from the research if the breeding of the tamed Botai horses had by then already led to the emergence of a genetically distinct new species. Yet their physical attributes were strikingly different, he added, and this made the animal more useful to people as meat, a source of milk, a beast of burden and for travel. Botai pottery yielded a third strand of evidence. Embedded in the clay pots were residues of carcass fat and fatty acids that “very likely” came from mare’s milk. This “confirms that at least some of the mares of Botai were domesticated,” he concluded. Earlier excavations at Botai sites, conducted by Victor Zaibert of Kokshetau University in Kazakhstan, also unearthed piles of horse bones and settlement remains of a people who hunted and herded wild horses for their meat [1]. The recent “Third International Symposium on Bio-molecular Archaeology: Trail of Mare’s Milk Leads to First Tamed Horses” reported on research undertaken by Natalie Stear of the University of Bristol. From residues left on 5,500-year-old Botai potsherds, Stear also identified the hydrogen isotope deuterium, indicating mare’s milk. Since it is impossible to milk a wild

mare, these data together with new evidence of harness including bits are a clear indication of early horse domestication and riding at Botai [2, p. 368]. Wietske Prummel, an archeologist from Groningen University is convinced that the taming of horses was different from the domestication of cattle and sheep. Those animals have a gene-pool of closely related animals. "May be because they were, unlike horses, herd animals" suggests Prummel. The oldest proof for the existence of the taming of horses dates back to about 6,000-7,000 years ago. The excavation of a "horse farm" in Kazakhstan, which dated back to about 3500 BC, showed that horses were probably used for milking, too. Bowls were found with residues of lactic-acid, Stear stated, in the *De Volkskrant* [3, p. 13].

In answer to the question why nomads used mare's milk and ate its meat, it could be argued that mare's milk provides energy and satisfies hunger and horse meat contains various vitamins that keep us healthy, especially in winter when there are no fruit and vegetables available. Nowadays, Kazakhs usually eat horse meat during winter. Horse meat helps people to survive the severe weather conditions of Kazakhstan. It warms the blood and also helps to satisfy hunger in the winter. The American scholar Pita Kelekna, a member of the New York Academy of Sciences and American Anthropological Association noted that "to withstand long steppe winters, notably the brutal cold of Botai, the human population required high consumption of fat to insure sufficient caloric intake. It is therefore interesting to note that by comparison to ruminants, horse meat is low in saturated and high in polyunsaturated fats and is also high in amino acids, minerals, and vitamins. It is significant that steppe folk beliefs commonly attribute unusual medicinal and nutritional properties to horse products" [4, p. 39]. Victor Zaibert also noted in his book *Botai Culture*: "...the food was meat, milk, vegetables, and fish, we have artifacts to prove it. However, the balance of the food was not the same, it depended on seasons... the differences of climate in the continent and weather conditions caused inequality in a year cycle of consumption of meat, the main share of annual meat consumption is in cold periods, it is less in warm periods" [5, p. 241]. In his authoritative book, *The Horse, the Wheel and Languages*, David W. Anthony, an archeologist at Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y., wrote in 2007 that horses are supremely well adapted to the cold grasslands where they evolved. People who live in cold grasslands with domesticated cattle and sheep would soon have seen the advantage in keeping horses for meat, just because the horses did not need fodder or water. A shift to colder climate conditions or even a particularly cold series of winters could have made cattle herders think seriously about domesticating horses. Just such a shift to colder winters occurred between about 4200 and 3800 BCE [6, p. 193-201].

Even today Kazakhs still eat horse meat and drink mare's milk - kumyz. As for the question why some other Turkic counties do not eat horse meat and drink mare's milk, F. Sumer attributes this to the influence of Islam. He said that after the adoption of Islam Mawarannahr (Transoxiana) played an important role in the Islamic world. We should note that in Mawarannahr people did not eat horse meat or drink mare's milk. The Oghuz (Turkmens) probably also gave up this tradition. In any case, he added, there is no evidence that they ever ate horse meat or drank mare's milk [7, p. 15]. Unfortunately, this conclusion is not reliable and there is no link with the adoption of Islam, as the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an, does not prescribe that Muslims should not eat horse meat [8]. This has to be checked with real facts. As Sumer added "there is no evidence that they ever used to eat horse meat or drink mare's milk". It could be the case that they never ate horse meat.

The Turkish scholar, Sumer, referring to Radloff's note, wrote about how Kazakhs love and respect mare's milk or kumyz. He also noted that kumyz is a satisfying drink which quenches thirst. He added how foreigners also enjoyed this drink, as Rahip W. Rubruck (ambassador to the French King (1253-1254)) once said that "he prefers kumyz as the best wine in the world" [7, p.3-4].

Kumyz is indeed a respectable drink that Kazakhs like. It is prohibited to pour kumyz on the ground and people should not step over it, as for Kazakhs it is a holy drink. In the old Kazakh tradition if a bride was not a virgin she would be placed on a horse back to front and sent home or if people liked the girl they would bathe her in white mare's milk. In this way, the girl could wash away her sins and could then marry her bridegroom. There is a Kazakh saying «*aieldin kunesi tek boz bienin sutine tusse gana ketedi*» which means that "the sins of a girl not a virgin can only be washed away and forgiven after she bathes in white mare's milk [9, p. 29]. In olden times white mare's milk was drunk only by family members, if white mare's milk was offered to a special guest it meant that the guest deserved respect [9, p. 55].

Kazakhs have many traditional holidays linked with kumyz. One of them is "Kymyzmuryndyk". This holiday is celebrated in the spring when people have overcome the severe winter of Kazakhstan and when there is a lot of mare's milk in the spring and summer to follow. They all drink mare's milk together and in this way the victory over the hard winter is celebrated. Kazakh nomads began to celebrate this holiday many years ago when they moved to their summer pastures. Toktabay noted that "Kymyzmuryndyk" is a national celebration of an importance equal to that of other national celebrations, such as Navruz and Kurban Ait [9, p. 165].

There is a special tradition for pouring somebody a drink of kumyz, offering (holding out) a drink of kumyz and for how kumyz should be drunk. Usually, in accordance with Kazakh tradition, kumyz is poured by careful young women or men dressed in neat national costume; in their left hand there should be a cup, known as a "tostagan" and in their right hand a ladle, known as a "ozhau" for stirring the kumyz without making any sound. After pouring the kumyz into the cup, the ladle should be placed on the corner of a dish called a "tabaq": then the cup, full of kumyz, is held in the right hand and offered to the guest. Offering kumyz with the left hand would be a sign of disrespect and ill breeding.

When man first milked a mare and intended to make some qurt (dried cheese in a round shape) and cheese just as it is made from cow's milk, he proved unable to do it: so there is a legend among Kazakhs that Kambar-Ata, the spiritual guide of the horse (according to the Kazakh every cow or horse has a spiritual guide), taught people how to make kumyz. That is why Kazakhs call Kambar-Ata the spiritual guide and protector of the horse, but he is also seen as a real man who taught the Kazakh how to make kumyz. In addition, Kambar-Ata is also a master of the earth, miracle-worker and a holy man who grants the birth of sons etc. So, worship of Kambar-Ata among the Kazakhs is of great importance and is linked to the worship of the horse in the life of nomads. Even nowadays, compared to shepherds, herders in charge of horses are regarded as more important. In olden times horse herders took part in all social affairs and would dine in the households of the rich. Horse herders would be given a place of honor in a yurt or in a room. Kazakh call this place "tör", that is a recess opposite the entrance to a room. Rich people, the so-called "bailar", would even give horse herders their daughters and accepted them as bridegrooms when they protected and saved their horses from danger and violent attack [9, p. 171].

The Importance of Horse Color

The color of horses also played an important role in the life of nomads. Usually, Kazakhs divide horse colors into three types: bay, black and piebald. Kazakh scholars group horse colors in three types. H.Arginbaev's classification of horse colors, for instance, involved: bay (including white, grey, roan, blue roan, flecked (spotted), dull, yellow, sorrel, sorrel-bay, liver-chestnut, blue, grey, chestnut, bright-red, red, yellow-red), black (including dark-bay, black, black-blue, black-grey, brown, bay, and other shades of brown) and skewbald (including white with yellow, grey or blue markings etc.) [10, p. 52-53].

White was the color expressing holiness and purity. As mentioned above, when people have sinned they could wash away their sins, if they bathed in the milk of a white mare, but not in the milk of a black mare (or mare of any other color). In this way they could wash away the sins they had committed: not only girls who were not virgins but any man, who had committed a sin, could also bathe in a white mare's milk and wash away his sins. Toktabay noted that, due to the fact that a white horse is holy and valuable for Kazakhs, they used not to ask for money for a white horse when it was stolen. One of the advantages of a white horse is that it can be seen very well in the dark at night. That is why in olden times young men used white horses when they went to see their brides in the night [10, p. 53]. White mare's milk is also used as a medicine, but this is really a custom of today's Kazakhs' ancestors: when someone was suffering from an illness or grief he would bathe in white mare's milk and believed that he would recover and get well soon. In the famous Turkic epic, dedicated to a hero named Alpamys, it is written that when Alpamys Batyr won a battle and returned home he made sure that his parents took a bath in white mare's milk as they had suffered while he was on the battlefield. So there is a Kazakh saying "*sheshendi boz biyenin sutine shomyldyratyn zhaiyin bar*" meaning you should bathe your parents in white mare's milk, showing you need to take care of your parents, respect and love them [9, p. 228].

In earlier times when soldiers prepared for battle before going to war there was a tradition of sacrificing a white horse and wishing soldiers good luck so that they might win the battle. When the founder and Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, Genghiz Khan (originally known as Temujin), went to fight the Chinese on his way to the battlefield he stopped on a hill and, together with his heroic soldiers and leaders of the hordes, sacrificed a white horse and prayed to Gök Tengri (one of the names for the chief deity in the religion of the early Turkic (Xiongnu, Hunnic, Bulgar) and Mongol (Xianbei) peoples. Worship of Tengri is sometimes referred to as Tengrism: the all-important figures in Tengrism are the Sky-Father and Mother-Earth. It involved shamanism, animism, totemism and ancestor worship [11]) [12, p. 189-200]. In the battle of Anyrakai field in 1726, the rulers of three zhuzes or hordes; (Kazakhs are divided into three hordes: the Great Horde, Middle Horde and Small Horde) came together to consult each other and elected Abilhaiyr Khan as their chief warlord and ruler. To celebrate this a white horse was sacrificed as a symbol of future victories [12, p. 201-202]. Whenever there was a war, battle, or litigation between zhuzes (hordes), tribes or khans and it was decided to end a war, battle or litigation between "brothers", a white horse would then be sacrificed. Those involved would then swear, by putting their forefingers into the blood of a white horse, that they would never again become enemies. The Kazakh scholar, A.Toktabay, cites examples of such customs from written sources referring to a study made by L.Badabamov. Toktabay wrote that after the battle between Abilayhan and the ruler of

the Dzungars, they followed this custom. This custom continued till the end of the 20th century [9, p. 229-230].

From history, we know that the color of horses also played an important role in the naming of directions when soldiers mounted their horses. According to A.Cinar, who referred to Sertkaya's notes: "The East is blue, the South is red, the West is white, and the North is black. Kul Tigin the General of the Second Turkic Khaganate would also change the color of his horse according to the direction in which he was setting off to battle. When he rode to the East his horse was light-colored or grey, when he went to the South the color of his horse was light-colored or brown, when he went to the West his horse was white, and when he went to the North he took a dark horse" and then he added: "The King of the Hunnic Empire, Mete Khan, also arranged the mounted formations in his army on the basis of horse color. Mete Khan, while encircling the Chinese army, used light-grey horses in the East, light-colored horses in the South, white horses in the West and dark-colored horses in the North: this was part of his battle tactics" [13, p. 17].

The main equivalence between the world view of space-structure and space modeling is that by every such means the world view is generated through the symbols of space. We can find evidence of this in inscriptions that give us information about the ancient Turkic culture. In old monuments written in the Uighur language the following colors correspond to animals: *east* – blue, green (the symbol of the dragon), *west* – white (the symbol of the tiger), *south* – red (the symbol of the magpie) and *north* – black (the symbol of the snake) are specified for instance. Nomads also designated parts of the earth by color: *red* – the color of the South, *black* – the color of the North, *blue* – the color of the East, *white* – the color of the West and *yellow* – the color of the zenith (the highest point of the sky) [14, p. 9]. Academician A.N. Kononov noted that the color geo-symbolism of the Turkic peoples apparently only died out recently, replaced by a linear-spatial orientation, as has often happened elsewhere. Even when such customs were only used long ago, they can still remain clearly evident in particular practical activities of individuals [15, p. 160].

Thus, the color of horses can be seen to have played a major role in the life of the Kazakhs – great nomads of the steppes - in both their daily life and their beliefs.

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