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Spatial Boundaries, Social Frontiers: From the Visible to the Invisible in the Geographic, Economic, and Social Space of Present-Day Central Asia

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In Central Asia, everything begins with geography, all is read in the economic sphere, everything is explained by the sacred (Poujol, 2000a). The Soviet 20th century sought to tame the geography, to subject the political to the economic and to divert the sacred towards the secular, going so far as to deny the natural propensity of the peoples of Central Asia to pass harmoniously from one space to another. But in many respects these efforts seem to have failed.

In Central Asia perhaps more than elsewhere, the notion of boundaries by which geo-social space is organized is embedded in the long term. But it presents itself equally as a factor over periods which are shorter, circumscribed, or discontinuous, according to the human time-spans of the political and ethno-confessional actors who "mark out the frontier",[1] the time of ideologies which provoke spatial disruption, exercising their influence over political entities that produce territories (Raffestin, 1980).

The intention of the present article is to address such notions of boundaries, frontal zones, and borders in Central Asia from a sociological and anthropological perspective, moving away from the history of the formation of inter-state frontiers, a complex and multi-dimensional subject which has been broadly studied by historians, geographers, and political scientists since the 19th century, and re-addressed since the end of the Soviet Union (Thorez, 2011; Gorshenina, 2012 and 2014).

Whether natural or artificial, formed then re-formed, these divisions which serve to demarcate spaces have a history, a geography, a sociology, a culture of being respected as of being transgressed. One can advance the hypothesis of a Central Asian continuum marked out by a lattice of frontal lines of geographic (desert/oasis), administrative, and security character, but equally divided up by boundaries and limits of social, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, memorial, and gender-related nature, boundaries that are commonly recognized by local populations who cross them daily.[2] These boundaries, whether visible or invisible, are more or less sharply perceived according to place and time. They stand outside of and in addition to the political frontiers that figure on maps and which have evolved over time,[3] promoting a questioning of the apparent uniformity of that space.

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Cataloguing these “tools by which social groups are incorporated into their territory” will allow the functioning of these boundaries to be illuminated from a different angle. The diversity and productivity of these social, mental, and ethno-cultural limits then becomes distinguishable, over and beyond their largely invisible character, within a Central Asian space that is shaped by emptiness and the projections of its inhabitants. This present work comprises an initial sketch of this pattern which seeks to trace out a few guidelines. It will necessarily require further investigation for it to be broadened and completed.

Geography as the starting-point

The space covered by Central Asia may be defined, represented, and constructed in numerous different ways, given that it has never been encompassed “by the frontiers of a single state” (Fourniau, 2006: 15). It covers an immense area: 2.7 million square kilometres for the Kazakh component, and 1.5 million square kilometres for the four other present-day republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Its morphology delineates several zones whose limits derive from hydraulic, climatic, and geoeconomic factors: the zone of irrigated oases, the steppe zone, the piedmont zone, the high montane desert plateaux, the semi-deserts, and the deserts.

The emergence of man-made irrigation from the fourth millennium BCE laid the basis for a longterm economic enhancement of the region, establishing several contrasting dualities on the scale of the territory as a whole: cultivated land/desert, lowlands/high plateaux, sedentary economy/nomad economy (extensive pastoralism), together with certain transition zones: semi-nomadic regions, piedmont regions.

The fluctuating delimitation of a “time-space”

Within the bounds of these vast zones, regional sub-spaces may be distinguished, each of which has its own identity, its patterns of use, and its temporality: the valley systems of the Amu-Darya, the Zeravchan, the Syr-Darya, and the Ferghana for the sedentary zone with its chaplet of populous oases; the steppe-land sub-spaces of Kazakhstan, the montane high plateaux of Kyrgyzstan, and the Turkmen nomadic desert zone.

Each of these sub-spaces so delimited lives, so it seems, according to its own time rhythms: the time-pattern of the sedentary populations is fast-moving, based on interchanges and the constraining rhythm of the agricultural seasons, whereas that of the nomadic herders is paradoxically slower and more static once the seasonal migrations have taken place. These two time-patterns, which are governed by their own specific constraints, have been associated with a particular space whose boundaries have expanded or shrunk consequent upon the different political regimes which have succeeded each other, which does not exclude their being constantly in relation with each other, a situation that continues in spite of the frontiers of the present-day states. These two economic timespaces, which necessarily share a symbiosis as well as a rivalry, have thus been, over the course of history, frequently deconstructed by operations of conquest of greater or lesser dimension. Such historical disruptions have implied a subsequent reconstruction of the time-space which, after a given transitional period, has always recovered its defining markers while progressively assimilating the constituent elements of the “New Time”.

If the disruptions which are conventionally dated from the end of one political regime and the beginning of another arise largely out of a change of symbolism and representation (even if, as in the case of the Central Asian republics, the elites have generally remained the same), they do bring about changes and transformations which find their expression in the geography of the

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boundaries. They equally set in place new continuities which require a long time to become uniform and amalgamated into the long-term cultural, social, and mental substrate. Some of these transformations are visible, notably in the areas of urbanism and architecture (for example, in the construction of new palaces, walled enclosures, and places of religious practice, centres of power, and sites of higher learning) and of life-style (introduction of *hammam* baths after Islamization, construction of mosques, *khanaqa* or pilgrim hermitages, caravanserais). Other changes become implanted in mentalities and social practices, and as such are more difficult to accord a precise time-frame to.

Nevertheless, it is sufficient to examine the different components of any given society undergoing a disruption of former boundaries to perceive that none evolve at the same rhythm. Even more than the question the pace of reaction and adaptation to changes, which most often are political in origin (driven from above), it is a matter of detecting the element of continuity which will pass over from one period to another notwithstanding the sudden disappearance of a particular socio-political framework.

Applying this to the history of Central Asia, it will be seen that there have been disruptive events which radically modified the time-space relationship, such as the Tsarist colonization which, in extending the frontier of the Russian state to the edges of the Hindu Kush, ushered modernity into the region and reintroduced a religious alterity to Turkestan in the middle of the 19th century. The late-20th-century dislocation of the Soviet Union, leading to the proclamations of national independence in a disaggregated territory, whose component parts (those that were formerly Soviet Socialist Republics) obtained a seat in the United Nations as independent states, constitutes another example of clear change of the geography of infra-social boundaries. Inversely, other ruptures prolonged the space within its pre-existing geographical frontiers while modifying the cultural and ideological temporality, such as the 1917 revolution and the creation of the USSR, the territorial successor of the Russian Empire; certain elites of the previous regime were capable of maintaining their status within the new power structure.

Thus, the intellectual and political history of Central Asia, just as its economic and social history, have been shaped by the more or less violent and swift overlay of a stratum of “new temporality” over the “earlier temporality”. It is by considering the persistence of practices, modes of governance and economic valorization, and the specific forms taken by social and individual negotiation of the new that one can suppose the existence of a “mental toolkit”[4] for spatio-temporal delimitation applicable to this region. Tracing the contours of a socio-cultural heritage, of an anthropology of the space and an anthropology of the political, economic, social, and cultural frontier, these tools, while difficult specifically to identify given the rarity of written sources, migrate from one period to another while leaving their visible marks on a given territory.

The necessary resort to written sources

Concerning the way these different geo-economic sub-spaces have been perceived in the past, we do at least have access to certain historical sources originating from Russian and Western travellers who crossed the Kazakh steppes as far as the oases of Khiva, Bokhara, and Kokand several centuries before the era of Russian colonization, which describe with considerable precision the transformation of the landscape as the caravans proceeded along their way (Poujol, 1992). The several-month-long journeys of these travellers, under the constant threat of being carried off or pillaged, reinforced in their minds the image of a steppe and desert space which was wild and dangerous and which ceased at the margin of the irrigated zone of sedentary habitation. Baron Georges de Meyendorff, on a diplomatic journey to Bokhara in 1820, wrote:

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> The desert came to an end at those sandy mounds. Beyond them, we were suddenly in the midst of fields, canals, avenues of trees; all around we could see houses, villages, gardens, mosques and minarets; in short, we had the impression of having been swept off to an enchanted land (Meyendorff, 1826: 79).

Quite apart from the considerable strangeness that Central Asia represented for Europeans of the 19th century, the zone of the steppes seemed even stranger. An obvious cultural barrier existed between the world of the steppe and that of the oases, which was closer to their own values as sedentary people.

The Russian envoy Philippe Nazarov, visiting Kokand in 1813, also perceived, as an inhabitant of a sedentary country, the difference between the "savage world" and "civilization". Emerging from the steppes to enter the Ferghana valley, he wrote:

> As you proceed into the heart of the country, you meet more civilization; you find ploughed fields, villages and finally beautiful cities, with large numbers of monuments and tombs containing the remains of saints revered by the inhabitants and by the Muslims in general… (Nazarov, 1821: 25–26).

The simple geomorphology applied to this space demarcates clearly visible margins corresponding to the modes of economic valorization mentioned above, in which societies establish themselves. As soon as artificial irrigation ceases, the green zone disappears and the steppe or desert asserts itself. The dividing line is sharp and unequivocal, practically without any intermediary zone.

Now it is precisely the existence of these immense and apparently limitless stretches of steppe and desert which has provoked a recurrent questioning around the significance of that zone at the heart of the Eurasian matrix, around its political, economic and social organization, a zone which is inevitably divided up into small units, hence bound within limits, both for those viewing it from the outside as for all those who have sought to control it.

The perception of mythic, political, and ethno-confessional space

Central Asia is certainly one of the regions of the Old World which has exercised the greatest level of fascination for Europeans, arousing a constant stream of cultural, historical and economic myths (Poujol, 2013: 119), some of which are embedded in its spatial identity. Its very locality "on the edge of the inhabited World" was long held in doubt by the Western imagination, just as was its geographic reality which only intermittently revealed itself, being rediscovered then forgotten again by a Europe in search of new frontiers.

One of the last cities founded by Alexander the Great of the thirteen brought to light by archaeology was Alexandria Eschatê "at the end of the world", unearthed at Khodjent-Leninabad in Tajikistan. Beyond it lay the still unknown Chinese world. Likewise, the rivers, frequently mentioned in myths and epics, have often served as cultural or even cultic boundaries, like the Amu-Darya which formed the frontier between Iran and the Turan,[5] and the Syr-Darya, which was long the northern boundary of Islam in Central Asia, with the steppe region given over to shamanism and tengrism.

The political space also possessed its own limits, as much in past eras as in the present day. In the minds of the Uzbek rulers of the historical states of Bokhara and Khiva from the 16th to the 19th centuries, the frontier of their possessions was drawn on the basis of the enumeration of the cities theoretically under their control, as a number of foreign observers noted (Poujol, 1992). Yet the rulers were of nomadic Turkic origin and could have included in the descriptions of their domains the exploitation of the "empty territories" which were the indispensable range for the

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back and forth migrations of the nomadic herders. But the hold upon them of the Persianized urban culture, based on the duality trade/irrigated agriculture, was so dominant that it led effectively to an identification of their power as extending purely to the perimeters of the oases, implying thereby a representation of a necessarily discontinuous state territory as a series of oases, isolated from one another by non-referenced "non-spaces".

This mode of demarcation has, moreover, spanned history since the pre-Islamic period up until today's states. The broadly drawn political borders do little more than incorporate within their boundaries regional entities separated by empty spaces which even the Soviet state did not completely succeed in assimilating despite numerous attempts at enhancement. Each region has its own frontier, marked by a police post, a monument, or simply a demarcation line on a map, and which can be closed for reasons of security.

Other criteria govern the functioning of these societies "coexisting" in the available space, whose insertion into the territory leads to the creation, without this having been intended, of ethno-professional and ethno-religious boundaries.

In the era of the Uzbek khanates, the Uzbek populations were the source of the military class and the agriculturalists working the land, while the Tajiks constituted the commercial and intellectual classes. This division has persisted up until the present in the form of a majority ethnic Uzbek social group dominating agriculture and the positions of power, and a Tajik majority group dominating the bazaar and the intellectual classes of the society. That is moreover the reason why any form of demarcation by the Soviet authorities of an Uzbek republic and a Tajik republic was destined to fail. The only solution proposed by the Soviet ideologues in 1924 was to create an autonomous Tajik republic inside the federal Uzbek republic. When it was decided to grant the Tajik population its own wholly separate Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929, the authorities of the period were obliged to accept a delocalization of Tajikistan in the direction of what had been called "Eastern Bokharia", the mountainous zone around the city of Dushanbe, with the loss as a result of their historic capitals of Bokhara and Samarkand.

Similarly, if we consider the Ferghana valley, the delimitation of the inhabited spaces operates outside of any association with the borders of the historic states, in particular those of the Khanate of Kokund which controlled the valley from the end of the 18th century until 1873, the date of its annexation by the Russian Empire into the government-general of Turkestan. The boundaries are drawn from the head of the irrigated valley where the sedentary populations, ethnically Turkic and Tajik (and called the "Sarts"), live. If you go up the piedmonts and on to the plateaux, you meet nomadic populations of Kirghiz origin. It is not a matter here of outlining frontiers arising out of a common acceptance of territory proceeding outwards from a capital and which would spread in tentacular fashion to the far reaches of an area, which, by the reluctant submission of the local authorities of the provincial cities, is known to concede only with difficulty to the authority of the central power (Poujol, 1984).[6]

It is this same ethnic demarcation corresponding to two different modes of the occupation of space which, in the current period, has brutally come to the fore in Kyrgyzstan, in the region of Osh and Jalalabad. It has provoked a series of murderous ethnic confrontations, the most recent of which occurred in 2010 between formerly nomadic Kyrgyz now marginalized in the national republic and urbanized sedentary Uzbeks, who have been the principal beneficiaries of successful urban implantation in the regional capital of Osh.

Similarly, one can detect visible memory-related traces of an ethno-confessional segregation in the oasis-cities of Bokhara and Samarkand inscribed in the morphology of these cities, or simply conserved through local toponyms. The division of these cities into *mahalla*, district communities, bears witness to a still extremely active system of delimitation, which adapted itself to the Soviet period and has re-emerged today in its functions of social oversight and organization (Dadabaev,

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Photo 1. May 1st celebrations at Semey, Kazakhstan, 2012 (Photo: C. Poujol).

2013), principally for questions of marriages and the celebrations which accompany them, implying a very broad participation of the neighbourhoods.

Numerous urban anthropological studies have produced maps representing the boundaries of these districts and the nature of their habitation (Sukhareva, 1966; 1976). The boundaries of three traditional Bokhariot Jewish quarters in Bokhara (*mahalla-i kohne, mahalla-i no, Amirabad*) are known, and those of the district called *Vostok* in Samarkand, which shelters a remnant Bokhariot Jewish population after the massive departure of the Jewish community since the end of *perestroika* (Poujol, 2013). The district named *Arabkhane* in Bokhara was made up of an Arab community arising from the conquests of Tamerlane, a certain number of whom still live in modern-day Uzbekistan, essentially in the rural regions (Fourniau, 1991). In the cities of Bokhara and Samarkand live shi'ite communities which re-emerged from concealment after the fall of the Soviet Union within the limits of their traditional quarter. In Samarkand, the name of the shi'ite quarter is *Penjab*. It is economically very active and includes a mosque, a cultural centre, and a cemetery. In Bokhara and Samarkand there also remain micro-communities of Chalas, Jews forcibly converted to Islam but who retain the trace of a secret practice of Judaism). Their houses are identifiable at the end of cul-de-sacs in the ancient parts of these cities. Like the last Marranos of Portugal, it appears that a certain number of them have returned to full Judaism as a result of solicitation by the Israeli government.

Traces of an ancient original implantation are still identifiable in the large cities of today despite various waves of reconstruction, such as the *Tatarka* quarter in Almaty, established prior to the colonial construction of the city of Vernyj, the future Alma-Ata. The Soviet period would bring in new demarcation lines between the fortunate beneficiaries of accommodation in the hyper-centre of the city, the so-called "golden triangle" and those relegated to the outer suburban fringe, the *mikroraion*. The housing crisis would last as long as the Soviet regime itself, finding an unexpected outcome after the country's accession to independence in the building boom that would follow.

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Nevertheless, new forms of urban segregation have arisen since the end of the Soviet Union. Particularly visible has been the appearance in the capitals of a hyper-rich urban class which has fostered the construction of sumptuous residences protected by electronic surveillance and surrounded by high walls, or which are erected in suburbs ringed by security fences and patrolled night and day by armed guards. This phenomenon is particularly developed in the new Kazakh capital, Astana, as well as in the previous one, Almaty, but is also found in Tashkent in Uzbekistan and in the other capitals of the region, Ashgabat, Dushanbe, and Bishkek, even if the social groups involved are numerically less significant. A frenetic rush of new constructions has struck the large metropolises of Central Asia, continuing an ostentatious manifestation of ornate edifices and esplanade gardens which projects the ideologies of the newly independent states and demonstrates their pomp and power.

But, beyond such present-day transformations of urban space along with the construction of an assumed and demonstrative posture in the direction of ultra-modernity, as witnessed by numerous new buildings in Astana, the question of social practices and the appropriation of space as revelatory of a "geography of boundaries", or even a "subliminal demarcation",[7] applies to every milieu, every geo-economic niche, and to all the societies implanted in the soil of Central Asia.

Social usages and practices of the appropriation of space in Eurasia

An individual's training for living in his or her society, whether it be in an urban milieu, the irrigated zone or that of seasonal pastoralism, consists of becoming initiated from childhood until adulthood in the normative code of behaviour which will allow him or her to pass from one point to another of the geographical, social and mental spaces within each zone, from the private space to the public or semi-public space, from the individual space to the shared space. There have been numerous anthropological studies which have addressed this question with respect to the Kazakh and Mongol nomadic zones (Stepanoff et al., 2013). They are, however, notably rarer for the sedentary areas of the region.

One thing is certain: if these boundaries are often invisible on the ground, they are nevertheless integrated into the practices of the inhabitants through patterns of signs, whether visible or not, which allow them to divide the space, to find their place in it, to progress from one point to another or one generational space to another and to engage in it in an economic fashion. In brief, to inhabit it socially and symbolically.

Whatever the space considered, the respect due to the older generations is shared by all, the use of formal terms of address to parents is widespread, ascertaining the age of the person being spoken to is a necessity for the appropriate formulation of one's manner of speaking and terms of address. Each individual is aware of his or her location at the point of intersection of their vertical network (those individuals who are hierarchically superior to them) and horizontal network (their equals in terms of age). Individuals are the depository of their "family honour", and in respect of this have received the necessary education to know what social and ethical limits must not be crossed if they are to pass through their lives, from birth to death, fulfilling all their duties and responsibilities.

The steppe or desert spaces: a return towards traditional postures

The space of the steppe or desert is known for its character of infinite uniformity, whence the difficulties facing those who wish to find a way through it or settle long-term within it. Up until the development of modern modes of transport, no one could venture out into it without taking

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particular precautions, without having a guide, without explanation. None could exploit it economically without careful analysis of its natural dispositions, its possibilities in terms of grazing land, its winter and summer pastures, and in terms of how to pass across it, implying the consideration of how such journeys could be made safely.

Today still, despite its apparent uniformity, it holds within it the memory of a mortuary geography and places of cross-over where access to the world of the spirits may be gained: any available rock wall is covered with petroglyphs, any hill in the steppe may shelter a *kurgan* or burial mound, just as any geographical point – a mountain pass or summit, a spring, a river, a tree – can signal the presence of a spirit (Poujol, 2000a).

Locating oneself in the steppe: overcoming the “sense of the infinite”

The initial concern of those who venture on to the steppe consists of determining one’s location in order to ensure one’s physical and moral security. As recalled by the anthropologist Carole Ferret (2014) who, reversing the proposition of a limitless space, analysed the Kazakh steppe from the viewpoint of its “spatial discontinuities”, a number of travellers noted that those leading caravans across it found their way thanks to a complex system of geographic observations incorporating natural elements (the sun, the moon, the stars, notably the Pole Star, which influenced the height and direction of projected shadows, the sites and orientations of hills, the direction of winds) (Ferret, 2014) and features of human origin: barrow tombs (*kurgan*) (Tolybekov, 1971: 471),[8] *obo* – small pyramidal heaps of stone which Kazakh, Turkmen, Uzbek, and Mongol travellers still set up today as they cross a pass or any other transitional space to attract the spirit who resides there and elicit its favour (Makoveckij, 1886: 340–341; Poujol 2000b).[9]

To these discontinuous features which mark out the ordinary space, distinguishing it from the sacred space, are added those pragmatic divisions used by herdsmen to divide up the territory of the steppe. Again according to Ferret (2014) who has studied the units of measurement and the categories of spatial orientation of the Altaic steppe, the herdsmen measured space according to the size of their flocks, then analysed their range by dividing it in relation to the seasonal grazing it provided, according to its needs.

For those who made use of the steppe, notably the herdsmen and those leading caravans across it, the estimation of distances greater than those physically measurable by individuals (of small stature) was made as a function of the number of *kos*, measures of distance equal to around 10 km according to most authors, but which in reality are variable as used by the herders of the Eurasian steppe, depending upon where they are and the season of the year, as well as upon the distance able to be covered in a day by different types of animals: lambs, colts, full-grown horses, oxen (Ferret, 2014).

Distances are estimated also by ear and by sight, a practice still found today. In Kazakhstan, the measurement called *aóyrym*, meaning the distance over which a voice can be heard, around one kilometre, is still employed by certain people, who will say for example that such and such a place is located “five calls away” (Aubin, 1970: 37).[10]

Residing, living, and surviving in the steppe

The second concern of those making use of the steppe was to be able to reside there over a considerable period of time by making use of transportable living quarters adapted to the climatic conditions, thus enabling the social life of the nomad families in different temporary localities.

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The yurt is the focal point of the traditional Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen pastoral society, around which the totality of the social, economic, cultural, and sacral space is organized. More than a construction, the yurt represents a veritable way of life (Poujol, 2007), the material sign of the adaptation of humans to a hostile environment at the same time as being the key to their psychic survival through a system of protection against the evil spirits.

In its architectural form, the yurt constitutes the sole family home, the new home for a young couple, a protective haven against the wildness of nature and the world of the spirits. It is the practical response to the necessity of ceaseless back-and-forth movement in the pastoral economy. Transported in wagons or in trucks, it can be erected anywhere in a few hours and equally swiftly taken down. It also represents the cosmogony of the world, its meaning, its rebirth through the rhythm of the seasons and through the succeeding generations, transmitting and protecting their memory.

Just as nomadism is very broadly considered by the sedentary people as a life of wandering,[11] the space surrounding the yurt is often perceived as being limitless, not because it is infinite, but because within this range no boundary or barrier arises to delimit it into distinct zones. However, anthropological studies of the Kazakh space notably show that in reality divisions do traditionally exist, particularly for the exercise of customary law (Aouelbekov, 2014), and that they are directly associated with an anthropological construction of sacred space, but whose boundaries are, on the whole, totally invisible.

The mental delimitation of horizontal and vertical, exterior and interior space in Kazakh nomad society

Before they became sedentary, the nomads of Central Asia, like those of Eurasia generally, inhabited the world through a geographic projection of the mind. They lived and moved in that world by reconstructing it through a set of law-like regulations known as the *adat* (natural law), and following a body of representations which were thought to lend meaning to their acts, their social practices, and their place in that environment. Today, the former nomads do not reveal any attraction towards nature, of which they have a great fear; they limit themselves to respecting a mental organization of the world in order to keep in balance all the forces present within it. In the languages of the pastoral nomads of Eurasia there exist an incalculable number of words designating the fear of unknown spaces, of wild nature, or uncontrolled change.

In order to appropriate space, the Kazakh nomads have drawn within it invisible boundaries which are linked to the organizational structures of their sedentary fellow-Kazakhs for whom the passage between the edge of the city and the place where they may be received as guests supposes the crossing of numerous “thresholds”. Transposed into the steppe, this process of transition could create a horizontal structuration of space in the form of five successive concentric circles. The first circle, the only one that is visible, would be that formed by the outer wall of the yurt, within which are concentrated the notions of order, peace, and the sacred. The second circle would cover the space between the walls of the yurt and the constructions intended for the animals, (enclosures, shelters, the hitching post for the horse). The third space would comprise the circle enclosing the yurt and the animal yards, marking a separation from the other yurts. This is a transition zone between the individual space of the yurt and that of the *aoul*. “Customary law precisely defines the norms of behaviour for outsiders in this sector. They must carry out a particular ritual in order to be able to pass progressively from one space to another as far as the yurt” (Aouelbekov, 2014: 46). The fourth space is that within the *aoul* or group of yurts, where social behaviour must also follow strict rules of good manners and the respect of calm, order, and

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silence. Shouting, noise, and loud arguments are forbidden in this space, as a Russian observer at the end of the 19th century reported:

> Whoever shouts and makes a noise in the *aoul*, especially at night, disturbs the tranquillity of those who live there and opens himself up to severe censure from the *aoul* or the district chief; likewise, whoever gallops a horse around the *aoul* or within the *aoul*, thereby perturbing the general calm, similarly risks severe censure from the chief of the *aoul* (Zagrâžskij, 1876: 170–171, 134, quoted in Aouelbekov, 2014).

The fifth would be constituted by the area outside of the *aoul*, beyond which begin the grazing lands, then the *adyr*, a neutral zone which is at once a profane and a wild sacred space, embodying war, thus dangerous, where no rule applies any longer and where "the aggressive potential of the society is expressed" (Aouelbekov, 2014: 57). The *adyr* would thus be an ambivalent space "in which positive and negative signs lose their clarity and tend to merge. Cultural norms can become metamorphosed there. It is the zone of shifting ground, unpredictability and instability" (Aouelbekov, 2014: 55). A murder committed in this space does not lead to any legal form of compensation (*qun*, or blood price). That is why the *adyr* elicits anxiety and fear and probably why the urbanized former nomads of Central Asia never go picnicking "in the country" or in the mountains.

The organization of social life through dialogue with spirits and ancestors

On the vertical axis, the yurt represents the cosmogony of the nomadic herders. It symbolizes both the universe (its curved roof being identified with the vault of the heavens, with the hole by which the smoke from the central hearth escapes giving access to it), and it establishes the vertical place of man in this universe. The floor of the Kazakh yurt is spread with black felt, itself covered with carpets with floral patterns, representing the world of living things, the world of nature. Access to the world of the spirits of the ancestors is by the hearth where the fire is kept constantly burning. The compression ring supporting the structure (*shanyraq*) signifies the unity of the family group, harmony, mutual assistance. The division between the inside of the yurt and the outside is very important, with the traditional laws relating to these spaces being totally different. The theft of property committed inside a yurt is punished by a fine three or four times greater than if it had taken place outside of it (Zagrâžskij, 1876: 102–103). The murder of a woman within a yurt had to be compensated by the rendering of a whole *qun* "the price of a man's life", whereas, to make good the same crime committed outside of the yurt, it was sufficient that a half *qun* compensation be rendered (Kul'teleev, Masevich, and Shakaev, 1998: 275).

Within the yurt, the positioning of the family members in terms of age served as a family tree. Before his death, the Mongol of advanced years would trace his lineage in a circle representing the yurt to be able to pass it down to his descendants. This circle was divided on a north-south axis, with the male side to the left of the entry doorway, hence to the east, and the female side to the right, to the west (the domestic side) with the cooking area. At the back of the yurt (to the north), the space called the *tor* in Kazakh, corresponding to the Mongol *qoïmar*, was the most important and prestigious area. It was there, on the far side of the central hearth, that special guests, the wealthy, and the elderly were installed. Guests from another region were placed where the sections of the wall lattice joined. In front of the doorway were the young, the beggars, the dogs, and the sick. This internal organization of space reproduced an ideal ordering of the world and scarcely underwent any change. Cooking utensils and mares' milk were placed on the women's side, precious items at

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the back and the horse-tack and whips, piled up mattresses and chests for possessions on the men's side (Poujol, 2007).

Disruptions and adaptations in the history of the Kazakh social space

The sudden encroachment of modernity, of an ungentle transition to sedentary living (Ohayon, 2006) and of an imposed urbanization as the sole model for progress upon this traditional structure governed by religious beliefs and by the perpetual shifting between the magic and everyday worlds has had the effect of destroying that traditional social order. But it has also generated forms of adaptation.

With the Russian colonization and the different waves of sedentarization, the nomadic space was completely transformed. The social tensions which previously had been thrust outside of the intimate space of the circle of yurts which comprised the *aoul* towards the "wild space", the *adyr*, have become retained within the summer or winter pasture encampments, leading to a collapse of social morality. The role of the yurts has undergone change, first becoming fixed in place in the form of winter snow resorts, then built in durable form (transformed into collective farms in the Soviet period), with the driving of the flocks up to the summer pastures becoming performed by only a small fraction of the population and limited to men and children.

Making dwellings, in various forms, conform to sedentary patterns of life has brought about the breaking up into discrete groups of the former nomadic society. Symbolically, this has been manifest in the apparent abandonment of the circle in favour of square or rectangular areas, the appearance of partitions in the interior family space, the presence of a flat ceiling, and the opening of window-apertures.

But it would be false to conclude that the newly urbanized peoples in Mongolia as in the former USSR have become totally acculturated to the sedentary model (Lacaze, 2012). Everywhere they have preserved traces of their nomadic "mental toolkit". The Mongolian capital, Ulan Bator, is well known for its quarters where there are yurts erected in little gardens next to houses. Those inhabitants of the city who are fortunate enough not to inhabit the multi-storied housing estates go to live in them for half the year to be able to put up with the intense heat and to relive their traditional way of life. Further, since the independence of Kazakhstan in December 1991, huge yurts are set up along the main avenues and in the squares of the large cities of the country during national festivals. The festive yurt as a national symbol which intermittently reasserts its rights over the tarred roadway no doubt serves to bind the wounds stemming from the loss of identity of the "asphalt Kazakhs" (a term current in Kazakhstan to refer to decultured urban dwellers) and to attempt to restore the broken link with the ancestral culture.

Nevertheless, this link is not uniquely re-established from on high, but is also the natural solution for citizens impoverished by the dismantling of the economy brought about by the collapse of the Soviet system. Those Turkmen expelled from their homes in Ashgabad for having the misfortune to be living in a zone intended for prestigious constructions have gone back to living in a yurt in the absence of any other accommodation. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who have lost social status are returning as families to a pastoral life in order to rediscover collective means of subsistence. But in this case it is a matter of a modern recycling of this lifestyle adapting to the new constraints of the economy.

There really only remains the mortuary geography which still presents a certain stability by bringing together various different practices of Islamic or shamanistic origin, reflecting sometimes a certain syncretism, or at least a formal juxtaposition, as shown in the metallic structures of funerary yurts which cover over an Islamic mausoleum that can commonly be seen in Kyrgyz or Kazakh cemeteries.

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Photo 2. Exterior walls of Khiva (Photo: C. Poujol).

The sedentary space

In the urbanized sedentary societies, the crossing of boundaries is also a constant phenomenon. The necessity of moving around constitutes in effect one of the givens for social functioning and durable economic development in this markedly enclaved region, bringing together the flow of goods, the places where they are stored then sold, and the persons involved in trading them.

Until the end of the 19th century when technological modernity was introduced into Turkestan with the construction of the first railway, the Transcaspian (Poujol, 1989), travel outside of the cities was by camel-train along the traditional caravan routes with caravanserais located at certain intervals along them, which enabled the passage from bazaar to bazaar, crossing city and village boundaries and passing over mountain chains.

The city boundary marking the entry to an urban area is today signalled by the presence of a police post replacing a former outer wall, as at Khiva, within which was a further fortified barrier which in that city has today been demolished. The boundaries to be crossed before private dwellings can be reached are those of the *mahalla* (quarter) and the *gouzar* (sub-quarter), then of the street or cul-de-sac, the threshold of the house, and finally the part of the house where one will be accommodated before reaching the place set aside for the guests at the host's table.

The urban space perceived as that which separates the particular zones of sedentary habitation is set about with indicators of social boundaries which the inhabitants cross daily. It would undergo new transformations with every accident of history: the Russian colonization, the Sovietization of the region, the accession to independence.

The Russian colonial period in Central Asia brought about abrupt changes in urban design, architecture, and lifestyle, introducing the model of the Western city alongside the indigenous city. This process would continue throughout the Soviet decades, seeing Russian working-class districts made up of long apartment buildings juxtaposed with local residential quarters.

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Determining one's way, moving around, crossing boundaries, passing from one age to another

The Islamization of the southern region of Central Asia from the beginning of the 8th century and extending into the 10th century took place across societies which were already structured by diverse earlier systems of religious and cosmological representation that served to regulate social practices and the paths to be followed to pass between one space and another.

The arrival of Islam brought about both the deconstruction and reconstruction of social and spatial boundaries, affecting the whole cycle of life, from birth to death, as well as the modes of "inhabiting the city" which would gradually come into conformity with those being practised in the rest of the Islamic world. Over all, new patterns of social movement would become embedded in the habits of Central Asian city dwellers, notably in the frequentation of the mosques and Turkish baths as new places of socialization which allowed people of the same sex to meet outside of their normal living spaces.

A network of canals, fountains, and public baths was set up in the principal caravan cities of Bokhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, a determining element in the general urban reorganization which thenceforth placed the mosque (*djuma*) at the centre of the city where previously the palace of the ruler or the governor stood. The movement of individuals within the city started from the mosque and returned there, traversing concentric circles within each of which were located commercial activities by order of importance – the most prestigious close to the mosque, the most polluting at the city's exterior (Narchakhi, 1892). The mortuary geography as well witnessed a structuration of space which had radically altered from the time of the region's Islamization. The new orientation in the direction of Mecca would complete the remodelling of the mental spaces of the sedentary populations.

The anthropology of social boundaries, profane and sacred spaces

As in the steppe world, there existed in the sedentary societies a sacred transitional space between exterior and interior which focused the attention of the populace, implying the need to respect certain rituals for the crossing of thresholds: those of dwellings, places of worship, mausoleums. In Central Asia, doorways, the entrances to sanctuaries and certain other thresholds required an invocation to be uttered as they were crossed, recollecting the influence of the Mongol conquest, which spread throughout the region the Chinese belief in the *spirit of the threshold* which lived in the in-between space and which was not to be disturbed. Over time these practices evolved, notably among the sedentary dwellers who touch the door-frame with their two hands or the two sides of the threshold, whereas it was sufficient merely to brush against the door-frame of the yurt of the great khan to be decapitated by the guardians of the threshold.[12]

Islam introduced new social and mental boundaries whose spatial translation is visible in the urban design, architecture, and functioning of the society. It led to a more and more marked separation between the world of men and that of women. The wearing of the Islamic *hijab* in public for women,[13] of the *parandja* as the garment to be worn out-of-doors by all women in Bokhara, including non-Muslims, as well as their seclusion in the wealthier urban milieus reveals a new geography of the body in the community and private spheres incorporating new modes of cohabitation, new routes of personal movement, new strategies for bypassing restrictions so as to bring about licit or illicit encounters or to organize marriages.

Within dwellings, a very clear separation was established between the women's quarters – *ichbari* – and the quarters for men and guests – *tahkari*. That did not prevent transgressive phenomena from occurring, even in the most coercive societies. A soldier from Meyendorff's escort,

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Photo 3. Muslim cemetery in Samarkhand: behind the wall, the Jewish plot. (Photo: C. Poujol).

encamped in the gardens around Bokhara in 1820, reported that the local women had taken up the habit of climbing up on to the roofs of their houses and of taking off their veil to show themselves to the Russian soldiers, until they were discovered by their husbands and forbidden from going outdoors (Poujol, 1992).

The setting in place of an "all-encompassing and determining" ritual process which enjoins a recurrent and near-absolute purification of the individual (to be undertaken five times a day) profoundly modified his attitudes and interaction with others and his engagement within the social sphere, the city, the private space of houses, the organization of family ceremonies,[14] things needed to be known for the numerous rites of passage marking the lives of Muslims (Remacle, 1997: 50).

A new boundary between the sacred and the profane, between good and evil, the pure and the impure, was traced, giving emphasis to the notion of morality and individual responsibility linked to intention: the *niya*. The tribal honour code was replaced by that of religious piety, on the scale of an extended identity, that of the *ummah* (Remacle, 1997). A new sacred geography which absorbed within itself the stratum preceding Islam became spread throughout the whole zone until it covered it almost entirely (Poujol, 2000a).

It is clear that Islam has radically altered the relationship of the individual with the sacred by redefining a new geography of social and mental boundaries. The redefinition of the status of man with respect to God, of his social obligations issuing directly from the religious reality (marriage and the obligation to ensure a descent, the conditions of divorce and inheritance) have ushered in profound transformations which have totally changed the modes of interaction of the singular individual in his relationship with the social body, the group, the community, with authority, urging him to change his way of being through a ritual of purification in order to leave the profane space.

The Tsarist colonization of Turkestan, then the 1917 Revolution which took a certain time to alter mentalities in Central Asia, did not manage to totally change the traditional practices, despite an intense campaign of ideological activism. For example, the Soviet authorities, having forbidden the sequestration of women at the end of the 1920s, launched an "open windows" campaign in

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urban houses which previously did not have any. A simple count of the number of windows on the street-front of dwellings in the traditional quarters of the large cities of Central Asia today gives a measurement of the degree of Sovietization of the families living in them. In the present day, whole streets can still frequently be found – in Samarkand, Bokhara, and in more modest cities like Charisiabz or Khiva – rows of houses without any windows on the outside.

Finally, as we have noted above, there exist a certain number of historically attested religious or ethno-religious boundaries in the main caravan cities of Central Asia; for example, the Bokhariot Jewish *mahalla*, the Russian quarters around Orthodox churches or cathedrals, the Shanghaj Korean quarter in Samarkand, around a Protestant presbytery (Buttino, 2009).

The places where religious shrines and cemeteries have been set up are so many focal points while allowing for a direct reading of a geography of the ethno-confessional boundaries which can match partially or totally a socio-professional division of the urban landscape, particularly in the large cities in the process of development. In this way it may be understood that these lines intersect without necessarily fully coinciding and that they take on new functions while still retaining a certain inherited inscription in collective representations.

Conclusion

The prism through which boundaries and frontal lines are perceived, allowing a visual means of structuring this space, seems thoroughly productive for the appreciation of the current political, strategic, economic, and socio-cultural situation of a Central Asia which has been undergoing a dual process of deconstruction and reconstruction over the last two decades, in light of the difficulty of bringing together exact, coherent, and complete parameters.

The new political and economic configuration arising out of the disruptions following the end of the Soviet Union has modified a certain number of social demarcation lines in Central Asia, without for all that changing them all. The retentive capacity of this contact zone between different worlds, as much as its propensity to absorb modernity and innovation with disconcerting speed is generating new socio-cultural boundaries in an already saturated social landscape, posing the risk of a slanted analysis of these societies by seeing them as either too traditional or too modernized.

The Central Asian region is particularly furrowed with ethno-professional and ethno-religious lines of demarcation. They correspond to the imperatives of economic development as they expressed themselves prior to the upheavals of the 20th century, between the sedentary economy and that of nomadic pastoralism, some of which are still pertinent. The accession to independence of the Central Asian republics, then their in-part successful integration into the global economy have generated new boundaries, dividing the social body inherited from the Soviet period into, on the one hand, a very limited segment made up of the economic and political elites, and on the other the rest of the society.

From another perspective, pointing up the intersecting patterns of boundaries of multiple functions in the previously pastoral societies does not contradict the evidence of a greater freedom of action of individuals, in particular in their relations with authorities. It is even possible that there is a certain causality relation between the fluidity of the nomad society, even after its forced sedentarization, and the greater political tolerance of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz republics in comparison to their sedentary neighbours, but with Turkmenistan constituting in this regard a problematic exception. An in-depth consideration is therefore needed into the “DNA” fixing all social limits, as much in the sedentary as in the historically nomadic zone. It is not certain that the social sciences are currently perfectly well equipped to establish coherent answers to these questions.

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Notes

1. One thinks in particular of the Cossack "frontiersmen", settled on the border between Russia and Kazakhstan in order to guard it.
2. The word "limit" derives from the Latin *limes* whose basic meaning is "a cross-path between fields", a sense which is pertinent here when applied to a space defined by structures, visible or not, which allow its users to appropriate for themselves their manner of functioning.
3. One can but observe, as in many parts of the world, the artificial, constructed character of the borders between the states of present-day Central Asia, through the way the boundaries of the Soviet Central Asian republics were transformed into new international frontiers since 1991,
4. To adopt the expression of the historian Lucien Febvre.
5. On the origin of the term "Turan", see Minorsky, 1934.
6. We might recall that the rulers of Khiva and Bokhara used to send their armies to gather the annual tax in their provincial *beyliks.* A captive Russian cannon-maker had indeed cast a cannon for the khan of Khiva for this very purpose (see Poujol, 1992).
7. The new commercial quarter in Astana is being built according to a master plan intended to recall the lay-out of the royal encampment of Genghis Khan, with the palace on one side, the bazaar on the other, and between them a succession of buildings by order of importance culminating in the Ministry of Petroleum and Gas which provides the security for the whole (Poujol, publication pending).
8. Quoted by Ferret, 2014.
9. They are called in Kazakh *bôlekhtìñ bel'gìsì*, "separation signs", or *bôlek tas,* "separation stones", cf. Poujol, 2000b.
10. This article is quoted by Ferret, 2014. The Mongols distinguish the distance "within earshot" from the distance "out of earshot", but it does not appear that that constitutes for them a genuine measure of distance, used as a standard length and able to be multiplied like the Kazakh *aóyrymn* can.
11. To reprise a comment of Max Weber on nomadism.
12. This practice may have persisted in the sedentary zone up until the 14th century, if one refers to the famous painting by V. Vereschagin *The Doors of Tamerlane*.
13. An ancestral, pre-Islamic practice, interpreted in the Qu'ran by two verses only: XXIV, 31 and XXXIII, 59.
14. After a birth, three ceremonies were ordained: day 1, the recitation of the *fatiha* in the new-born's ear; day 7, the naming-day festival, the offering of a sheep; day 40, the raising up of the delivered mother, the first emergence in public of the baby. Between three and seven years: circumcision; at 7 years, the public recitation of the Qur'an. Adolescence: around 12 years, first ramadan; between 15 and 20 years: marriage, accession to the status as man or woman. Adulthood: birth, circumcision, and marriage of children. Death: funeral, purification, burial (spiritual birth, new marriage).

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