CHAPTER 5

Paths, Pathos, and Portables: Nomadic Culture and Materiality of Movement in the Black Lands of Kalmykia

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**Introduction**

This paper explores movement, connectivity, temporality, and portability in the lives and material culture of the pastoral nomads of the Black Lands semi-desert located in Kalmykia (between the Northern Caucasus and the Lower Volga River in Russia). Movement was at the core of the nomadic worldview, in which people, their landscape, cultural memory, emotions, and materiality were intimately interrelated. I will focus on how mobility reproduced this connectivity during pastoral cycles of the migratory movements, when nomads constantly strove to reconstitute their cosmic order through righteous actions as their communities progressed through the cycles of time. Because nomads were exposed to new experiences and events during each migratory cycle, movement itself was a transformative process.¹ Mobility, which resulted in “displacements of peoples and things,” was also an emotional experience that caused “displacement of memories and feelings onto artifacts, ruins, and longed-for places.”² In this process, the material and metaphoric manifestations of paths, pathos, and portables can be pointed out as key signifiers of mobility and connectivity – the prime ingredients in the nomadic practice and politics of the everyday.

This paper, therefore, delves into the practice and temporal experience of the nomads’ regular rhythms of life, their ephemeral but pervasive footprint in the landscape, their cultural memory and aesthetic of mobility, a strong emotional sense of loss and return, and ultimately, their kinship power which held their entire cosmos together. Nomads worked hard to reconstitute their kinships and connectivity through various political acts on a regular basis and on the move. The power of these acts should not be underestimated or taken for granted, because it recreated the social fabric of the nomadic community on a

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¹ Beaudry and Parno 2013:3; de Certeau 1984.
² Dawdy 2013:261.
day-to-day basis, and at the same time it was a cause for major political changes. Understanding how this power emerged through the movement of the everyday helps us to break up the timeless sense of historicity attributed to the nomads by traditional archaeological and historical scholarship which portrays them as ahistorical and culturally static.3

History, memory, and the past are not the same, and they are culturally specific. Western history and archaeology with their teleological foundation and “rationality doctrine” privilege a linear sense of time, while nomadic historicity tends to be largely cyclical and based on cultural memory “associated with the continuity between past and present.”4 History thrives on the difference between past and present actions and actors, which are selectively represented by those who have power and voice, and who at the same time selectively eliminate “actions which are not simply cyclical, repetitive, or inevitable.”5 Nomadic collective memory differs from history in the way it reconstructs the past, which is done in a more inclusive, repetitive, and cyclical mode – the past that is remembered, re-interpreted, and re-enacted in order “to serve certain purposes” of collectivities at large.6 Therefore, focusing on nomadic cultural memory as the mode of their own historicity has the advantage for better comprehending how more localized, community-based “vehicles of power” operated and how politics and history were made through social interaction on a daily basis when the nomadic publics were intrinsically engaged.7

Understanding nomads of the past also requires refocusing from traditional archaeological approaches with their fixation on “settlement archaeology” to more “fluid, trajectory-based studies.”8 It is not only that traditional archaeology has been unable to tackle the material evidence of cultural and social transformations of the nomads, but it has often failed to locate nomadic material traces entirely, treating those groups as “invisible communities” devoid of their own “culture.”9 For instance, the only longue durée transformation that those approaches had to offer for the nomadic societies was an evolution “from

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4 Hua 2009:136–7; see Blaut 1987 for his discussion of the European “rationality doctrine.”
6 Hua 2009:137.
7 Graeber 2007:388.
8 Beaudry and Parno 2013:1.
9 See Shingiray’s (2012:390–3) critique of Pletenva’s (1999) model “from the pastures to the cities.”