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**Identities and Borders:
The Territories of Central Asia**

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Subjectivity of the adjective “central”

One of the most frequent questions that divides and let discuss the area researchers are: “Which are the borders of Central Asia? *What is Central Asia?*”

It deals with a concept, particularly because of that adjective *central*, easily adaptable to a lot of situations and territories, and for this reason each discipline concerned to this geographical area, geography, anthropology, archaeology or history, uses this term in a subjective way.

Every discipline, assigns therefore a different meaning to this expression.

For physical geography, Central Asia is a part of Asia that has well defined bounds and borders: Caspian Sea on the west, Siberian taiga on the north and mountainous chains of Tjan Shan, Pamir and Hindu Kush on the southeast. For anthropology, which delimits the area less rigidly, Central Asia represents uses, customs and cultures can be found in its populations. Independently from the distance or from physical or political obstacles, anthropologic Central Asia doesn't see the map or the history, or, better, it see how maps and history influenced the populations, their way of live; it unites and studies cultural backgrounds that have brought the populations, for various motivations, to a political or geographical, but not cultural, division among themselves. Central Asia is still more deprived than borders for the archaeologists that, indiscriminately, associate the bronze's age in an excavation in Uzbekistan to an excavation in Iran: the origin it's the same, the practices and the rites are the same, Central Asia starts where are found similarities with the carbon, don't care the mountains, the deserts or the political or cultural evolutions which divide them: the urbanistic system of bronze's age is the same in Iran and in the valley of the Amu-darya and this is, for the archaeologists, Central Asia.

For historical researchers Central Asia is what it's united by the same past. This is the origin of the tendency to speak of *historical* Central Asia only concerning

to the new five ex socialist republics: Kazakhstan, Kirghizistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

They have a common past and a common history, they don't matter the linguistic differences that can exist among the four republics with turcophone majority (Kazakistan, Kirghizistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and the only one with the indo-European origin majority (the Tajikistan). Their past, czarist for first, and Soviet then, is common: the past makes it Central Asia.

In reality, *Central Asia* is a concept born from a whole factors.

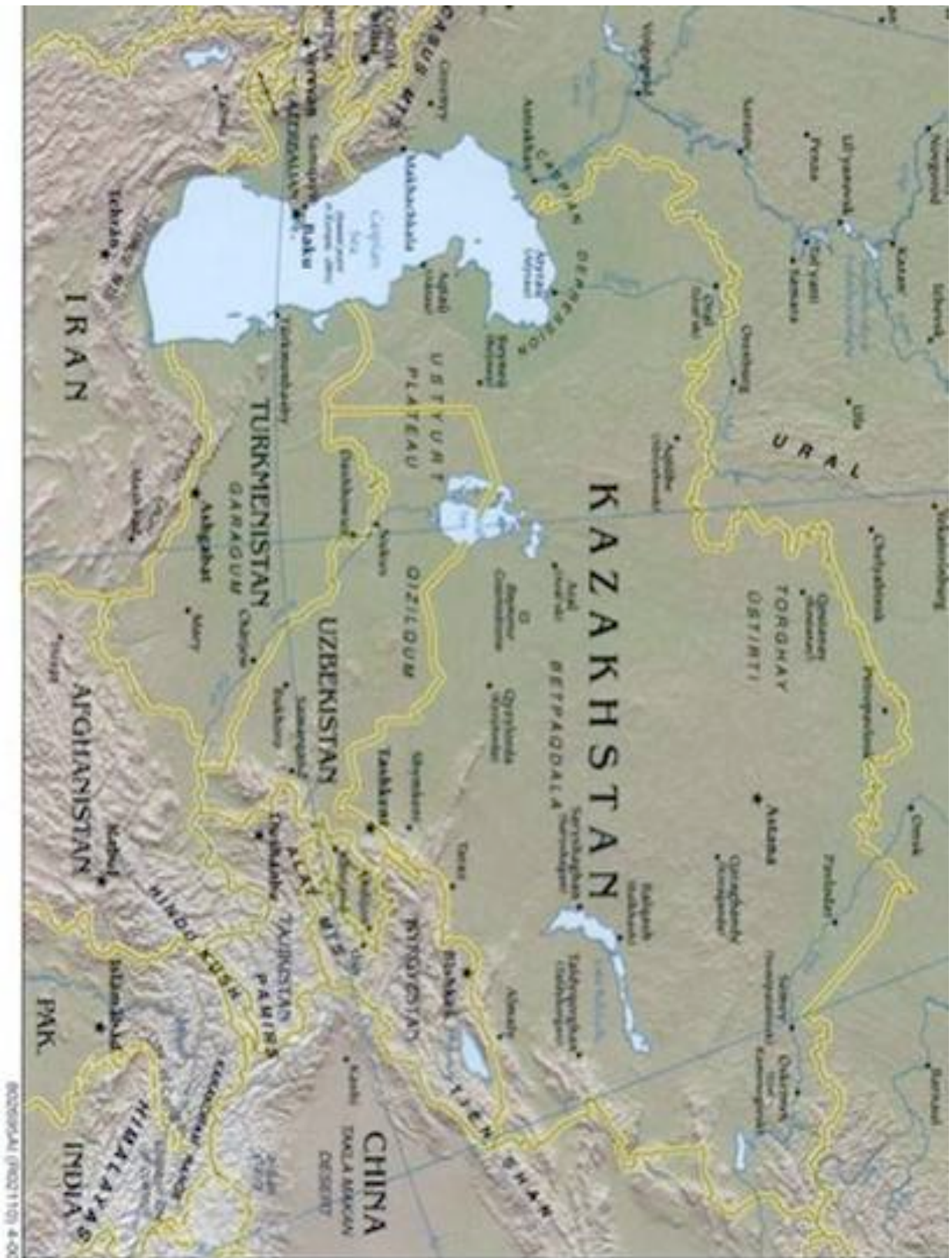
Central Asia is a physical place that properly finds latitudinally his borders and his territorial homogeneity between the Caucasus and the central provinces of China, longitudinally in the kazak steppes and the mountainous chain of Hindu Kush; and it's the intersection among two completely different Asian civilizations. The first one is that of the populations with turco-mongol origin coming from lake Baikal's region, at north of the actual Mongolia, mainly nomadic populations, characteristics today findable in kazak, kirghiz and turkmen populations. In reality also those that we today call uzbeks get turco-mongol origins, but, with the growth of the urbanization in the southern zones, founded rich and favourable oases to the sedentarization in the mesopotamic lands between Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya, they decided to stop the nomadism, building up societies and sedentary cultures and approaching themselves deeply to the second centrasiatic civilization.

The second civilization is that of the sedentary populations, with indo-European language and culture, heritage of the Persian presence in the region, especially located in the southeast zone of the centrasiatic area: the tajiks. The people that we call tajiks today is the ethnic result of centuries and centuries of colonization. The first one was the Persian: Dario I, in the V century B.C. extended his empire in the Transoxania area (it means *beyond the Oxus*, ancient name of Amu-Darya)

creating the Sogdiana region (actually region separated among Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). It was the first time in which a permanent and “civil” empire occupied for a long time those lands considered no man’s lands. The second colonization happened aside Macedonian: Alexander the Great, in the III century B.C., removed from the Persians big part of their territory among which the two centrasiatic regions, developing their potentialities, above all commercial, widening that whole of caravan routs, the so-called Silk Road, whereof the tajiks people even today are the principal actors. Alexander, founded besides in Central Asia his last Alexandria, called *the Eskhate* (the last) today called Khujand, an important city of the tajik Ferghana.

Central Asia literally represents the intersection of these two Asian cultures, the nomad from the north and the sedentary one from the south, the expression Central Asia represents, therefore, the result of this union.

Fig. 1 – Physical and political map of Central Asia



Uzbekistan, the centre

As all the intersections, also this one has a heart, a neuralgic centre: the place that represents more than anything this cultural *mélange* is the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan, a real geopolitic centrasiatic zipper, is situated in the centre of the area, it is the only country that borders with the others four and it is the only country that has solid political-commercial relationships with the other four neighbours. It represents, besides, the more ethnically and culturally variegated country, inside which, besides the proud and numerous uzbek majority, we find on the west numerous minorities as the karakalpak¹ and kazak populations, which represents the nomadic component; the Persian-tajik oases of Buchara and Samarkand; Tashkent, the capital, still tied up to the Russian cultural heritage and the Ferghana valley, with its identities and its *Cultural Regionalism*, perfect result of the union of these minorities.

Uzbekistan represents the perfect union of these centrasiatic peculiarities, the adhesive that allows to speak of centrasiatic culture, amalgamating within itself its different components.

Centrasiatic territories and borders

Accordingly, the term *territory* assumes different values in Central Asia.

In the desert and seed-desert areas in the north and in the southwest of the region, the human organizations cannot assume stable forms; it is impossible to cultivate and to build, for which the organization of the groups take the tribal-nomadic shape.

¹ Tatar-Turkish Population, of nomad culture, inhabitant western Uzbekistan, near Aral sea. The Karakalpaks manage their Republic of the Karakalpaks, autonomous region present since the Soviet system.

In this situation, the groups are not able whether to elaborate a kind of nomadic life, based on the technology of the mobility: it mainly concerns breeders that continually stir to the search of water and pastures or simply to escape to other tribes. The struggle with other population both nomad or sedentary it is a recurrent necessity; the nomadic breeders necessarily have to be warriors and marauders able to defend themselves and to survive, and it depends in good part on the ability with which they stir to horse. Their territory and their environment are these seed-desert areas in which the armies of the sedentaries cannot penetrate it, not having any orientation ability in this kind of landscape, while the nomad adapt their style of life, developing appropriate techniques, elaborating codes and topographical references with which they can recognize the itineraries and they are shaped a mental map of the environment in which they develop their life group.

The territory is classified in useful places: seasonal pastures, woods or rivers, or in places to be avoided, because deprived of resources, or frequented by other tribes or because object of superstitions. In this way the nomad movement take a less irregular course and often seasonal and paradoxically the territory becomes *of their ownership*, inviolable from other tribes or from sedentary populations. A whole codes allow them the identification of the territory from the tribe: lists of toponimis, religious practices. The culture of the nomad foresees, in fact, techniques for the territorial recognition consisting in a signals system: the tribes, in fact, mark the territory with the *kurgans*.²

It develops a sort of sacred geography, where these signs represent the only reference in the flatness of the horizon; it deal with signals that, set on the crossroad of the steppe, only the nomads can recognize and they become the references for the

² Funeral tumults that characterize the landscape of the whole eurasiatic steppe.

migrations. In this way, the practical elaboration of the religion creates the presupposition for the development of social and politics forms tied up to the territory. The environment of the steppes served as background to the creation of the first forms of political nomadic eurasiatic culture identified as *tribal feudalism*. The tribes are organized in *hordes*, confederations, unions consolidated with legends about the common descent or legitimated from a certain genealogical interpretation. By this way the nomadic or *Steppes empires* took shape, however they have existed and have occupied not the territory in lasting way, but only during the arc of life of the commander heading the horde.

To the south of the great centrasiatic land, in the oases, it prevails the culture of the stability and the agrarian technology. In these areas born a sort of city-state as *territorial state* structures, that gave origin to centres of power or centres of economic accumulation, to cultural dynamics that could not come true among the lost nomadic installations. In that time urban civilization is developed that it possible to classify among the most ancient of the world as Buchara and Samarkand and cities that will become great powers as Merv and Kashgar. These cities constituted points of exchange along the caravan routs, centres in which handicraft activities were developed; in these places culture and economic exchanges could freely be reproduced despite an autocratic political organization, according to the definition of *Oriental Despotism* elaborated by Karl Wittfogel.

The merchant, to every way, he could stir in safety to put aside from his ideas, from his religion and from the ethnic affiliation. For this reason, since the antiquity, the centrasiatic cities have developed a diversified cultural picture, that is composed by a plurality of cults, languages and technologies; really this plurality seems to be the presupposition of a great wealth: the commercial routs worked as tools of integration

and the Silk Road, became the metaphor of the movement and of the exchange, the essence of the civilization.

From here the paradoxical centrasiatic situation: the tribal feudalism, despite its nomadic component, it ties itself to the territory, even if only seasonally, and it doesn't allow the violation of it from anybody; the great emirates of the south, instead, despite the governmental structure strongly territorialized, develop a social system open to every kind of cultural exchange, the territory becomes property of everybody and all the customers become of the territory, the stranger is not considered like a stranger, and also the nomad that desultorily comes from the north to make provisions, he's well accepted and perfectly succeeds in integrating himself in the social system. The socio-political-territorial structure of Central Asia has practically been unchanged up to the contemporary age when, toward halves the XIX century, the Russian empire has started to invade the centrasiatic territory, the nomadic one and the sedentary one.

The centrasiatic world was englobed in gradual way by the new Russian socio-political system: at the beginning the territorial states of the south were standing inside the great czarist system, subsequently they were dismembered and the centrasiatic territory was divided in four governorships, all dependent ones exclusively in Moscow. The birth of the governorships had a strong impact especially in the north, in the nomads' earths: for the first time the *Steppes Empire* had been delineated and hinged in a political institution reported to a precise territory.

This phenomenon brought numerous revolts and assaults from the various nomadic tribes towards the Russian outposts and the new centres of the czarist power: someone was changing their world, was twisting their identity, producing a new socio-political apparatus subsequently destined to modify him.

In the 1920s, with the Russian Revolution and the contortion of the political imperial system, it changed also the already new political-territorial structure of

Central Asia, for the first time, they born the states and for the first time in these earths it were traced the borders.

Among 1920 and 1936, according to the principle of *Divide et Impera*, the centrasiatic territory was divided in five Soviet Socialist Republics, but the institution of the borders it was a manoeuvre exclusively finalized to the most greater control of that boundless expanse. The centrasiatic territory didn't exist anymore, he had been dismembered in functional way to the demands of the power. These populations that always had lived together harmonically, without any form of border, simply differentiating itself for the language or for the nomadic or sedentary character, found itself divided and canned in fictitious states with names and identity created by the Soviet ethnic engineers.

The names and the borders assigned to the five republics didn't have any historical value, the names had been taken by the ethnic groups of majority of the various areas and the borders they had absolutely been traced in the most greater part in casual way (for example the western uzbek-kazak border). The first objective of these borders was the differentiation of populations how first they were never diversified, where the use of the language or the social system had never represented a discriminating factor and therefore a factor of national identity.

Those, at first, was the *Urban Turkish*, became *Uzbek*, term that has always existed, but, in this case, purchased a nationalistic value, distinctive; those instead was the *Urban Persian* became *Tajik*, who speak a different language, *the Other*. It were set labels that, for the first time, made the next one appear as *different*.

Labels that, for the most part, unite different groups for language or way of living and they perfectly differentiate equal groups. We remember the above-mentioned ethnic-territorial formation of Uzbekistan. Inside this great national box we can find the sedentary turkish population, assembled especially in the oriental regions

of the Fergana, the turco-nomad populations of Karakalpaks and Kazaks in the north western steppes, in the south the persian-tajik oases of Buchara and Samarkand and the capital, Tashkent, still tied up to the Russian cultural heritage.

But after all the cultural centrasiatic unity was still long alive, even if strongly hindered by the Soviet indoctrination. It kept on surviving in the social substratum, and rather the cultural distance from Slavic and atheist Moscow, approached and united more still the Turkish and the Persian identities, of the centrasiatic area, both Islamic.

The Muslim universalism continued to be the social identity to which the centrasiatic population continued to make reference; as language it had periodically spread some lingua franca, like the Farsi, a persian language, for the literature, the Arab for the religion, and the Chagatai Turk, that developed a function of interethnic vehicular language, languages that somehow they also stayed after the Soviet advent. With the collapse of the Soviet system between 1991 and 1992, to the five centrasiatic *States* were added the five centrasiatic *Nations*.

A wave of nationalism and the desire of a state-nation with an own history and an own origin invaded the centrasiatic territory. The fates of the five republics were submitted to the secretaries of the various national Communist Parties, who became the guides and the successors of ancient national traditions. They rose, out of the thin air, five different national histories, five heroes to give the paternity of the nation, five national hymns all with thematic as the exaltation of the country love and the national feeling and even five languages, carefully diversified with “national” terms and with alphabets modified.

So were born the actual republics of Kazakistan, Kirghizistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The borders became more and more tall and insurmountable, those delimitations that up to sixty years before were not even been

thought, now are an impassable limit, a limit that has made the people different; while first the borders were inside the Soviet system however, instead now they are real international borders.

Nationalism or localism?

From the binomial imperial/local, now, the centrasiatic territory, has been completely catapulted in the national dimension. Up to 1991, even though already uniformed in the five Soviet republics, Central Asia belonged to the great Soviet box, recognized by the autochthonous society only by the political-bureaucratic point of view, but the most important dimension, during the Soviet period, it was the local one, where the centrasiatic man continued to practice a purely territorial vision of the society, continuing to live according to the criterions city/countryside or desert/mountain. With the fall of USSR and the birth of the five state-nation, instead, the centrasiatic world has totally been deprived of the imperial-multiethnic dimension, *super partes*, has been somehow private also of the local dimension, assembling all expectations on the new national dimension, absolutely fictitious, that had to provide for the bureaucratic-politics formalities of the ex empire and it had to recreate a cultural and identitary unity to replace the local dimension considered anti-national.

If on one side Central Asia has repurchased the cultural independence from the Soviet yoke and take back its culture and its identity, on the other side this independence has brought a total geographical-cultural fragmentation, each of the five republics are reinvented its history and its autonomous identity, detaching itself from the rest of the great centrasiatic area and cancelling common centuries of life.

Despite this, today some preaching pushes of equality and cultural fraternity are found, tied up or to the Panturkism or to the Muslim universalism.

The Panturkism is born at the end of the XIX century in Hungary, but it had its maximum shine in centrasianic area when, after the fall of the Soviet system, Turkey starts to have socio-cultural claims on the neo centrasianic republics. It starts to intend themselves as new filter of communication between the new republics and the world, Turkey starts to culturally invest in the new republics (numerous centrasianic young will begin to study in the *western* Istanbul and Ankara) and it will start to invest Turkish capital to finance projects of industrial modernization in the ex Soviet republics, all in name of the Turkish brotherhood.

The second tide is tied up to the religious factor. With the slope to the power of Mikhail Gorbaciov in 1985 and with the loosening of the Soviet repression towards the cultural differences inside the Union, religious integralist movements start to born in the whole Central Asia, but especially in the Ferghana valley. They, pushed by the liberal wave, start to preach a real independence of the territory of the islamic Soviet Union and the birth of an Islamic State.

These movements, among which we remember only the most famous, the historical IMU,³ that with its charismatic leader Jumaboi Ahmadzhanovitch Khojaev called Namangani brought forth a private war against the uzbek government and against his president Islam Karimov for three years (from 1999 to 2001), in name of the liberation of the uzbek territory from the new dictatorship, to finally establish an Islamic State. Namangani, as the other Islamic movements who have found a rich soil in Central Asia, was supported once by wahhabi Saudi foundations, another one by integralist pakistan movements and another time by the Afghan Taliban. This kind of identitary current has gone diminishing, especially in the last years, because these

³ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was a militant Islamist group formed in 1998 by Juma Namangani, and Tohir Yuldashev, both from the Ferghana Valley. Its objective was to overthrow President Islam Karimov, and to create an Islamic state.

movements were too much violent and because they preached a *wahhabi*⁴ Islam, therefore very integralist and rigid respect to the moderate *sufi*⁵ Islam, diffused for a long time, in Central Asia.

Conclusions

These currents are still alive in Central Asia, it is not possible today to identify only one cultural centrasiatic thought and it is not possible therefore to generically label the whole population of the area.

The Soviet heritage is still present in the nostalgic ones of the totalitarianism and in the Russian minority, still very diffused especially in Uzbekistan, Kazakistan and Kirghizistan. The national identity, strongly promoted from all the five governments, is present especially in the ethnic majorities of the capitals. The local-territorial affiliation, is diffused especially in the Ferghana valley, separated from decades among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirghizistan, but that culturally continuous to be also a homogeneous reality thanks to the strong religious tradition. The religious feeling, the Islamic one, is mostly diffused among the permanent populations of the south (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), in comparison to those nomadic of the north. The Turkish Being is instead an identitary value that, especially in the last years, it is developing in the four republics to turcophone majority. Everyone, draws near and mostly ties himself, therefore, to the identity in which recognizes more and each one, gives to the *centrasiatic* term the meaning that more represents himself.

⁴ Islamic movement been born in Saudi Arabia in the XVIII century and become inspiring thought of numerous movements fundamentalists because of his doctrine on the purity and on the original rigor.

⁵ The Sufism is a moderate religious Islamic movement developed at the beginning from the IX century and very diffused in Central Asia. It sets to the centre of its thought the philosophical reflection, the mysticism and the individual pietas.

Central Asia is therefore confirmed as confluence and intersection of identity and cultures and, accordingly, territory, for definition, deprived of borders.

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