

**ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TIME, CALENDER AND DIRECTION CONCEPTS IN
THE EARLY EURASIAN NOMADS
(PART 1)**

A Knowledge Sociological Analysis with a Civilizational Theoretical Perspective (Norbert Elias)

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I. ON THE CIVILIZATIONAL THEORY OF NORBERT ELIAS

The German sociologist Norbert Elias [1] is still not very well known in Turkey although he accomplished a remarkable synthesis of Freudian psychology, sociology and theory of state. According to Norbert Elias civilizational processes are directly interrelated with state-building processes. His paradigm is universally applicable because he tries to determine the structural peculiarity of social transformational processes through comparative method. In this article, I have tried to apply his civilizational model to the ancient nomads of Eurasia.

Central to his theory is his **multilevelprocess modell** which entails the following interdependent partial processes of social development. He calls these interdependent transformational processes **triad of basic** controls, which refers to the first three of the following processes:

1) The degree of control of individuals over their own emotions, affects and drives through the development of a super-ego which functions continuously, uniformly and encompasses all spheres of life. It is the outcome of the transformation of the psychic structure of humans with respect to the relationship between conscience and drive scope.

2) The degree of control over the nature, natural events, which stays in a direct relationship with the level of development of knowledge.

3) The state-building process, which means the attained level of monopolization of power and taxation through a central authority and its degree of control of groups—that is the distribution of power rates between intra-state groups (within the society).

4) Power rates between the states (or in pre-state periods between the units of political integration like tribes).

5) The level of development of lingual or other symbols which directly influences the way of thinking and feeling (e.g. science vs. myths and ideologies) of the capacity to a higher level of abstraction, of creating synthesis and of emotionally detached way of observing the world and the cosmos.

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These five long-durational partial processes are interdependent: Their balances and transformations affect one another (Elias, 2007b).

The differentiation of social structure, the progression of functional interdependencies and the elongation of chains of these interconnections are the source of social coercion. [2] Therefore parallel to this increasing level of interdependences and their coercion in the long duration the personality structure of humans transforms in the direction of strengthening and differentiation of affect-control (Elias, 2012a). The higher levels of individual super-ego and of psychic control-apparatus are characterized by the continuity, consistence and the automatism of suppressing the affect expressions and of self-restraint. It is the internalization of fear of the external restraints and potential violence by the control agents of the society. So in less differentiated and integrated societies individuals have more discontinuous and inconsistent self-restraint being very strong or very weak in different spheres of life and at different times. That means, the process of increasing differentiation and integration of the society creates a coercion to transformation of the psychic structure in the direction of increasing self-control on the one hand, and necessitates the development of a central monopoly of power, of the state, on the other hand because such a complex society needs the monitoring of a central coordinator. The state, which monopolizes the means of coercion (instruments of killing, soldiers, police, e.g.) and therefore the right to exercise violence prohibits the violence between people thus pacifying the society. The attained level of pacification of the society by the state corresponds to the level of development of self-control/self-regulation of individuals that means to control the sudden drives and emotions.

Through fear and the feeling of threat whatever the source may be, that are dangers by the nature and the dangers caused by the society, other humans or other states at the international level the process of civilization stagnates. This holds also and especially for the unpredictability of state violence and the dangers or disasters caused by the nature. Hunger, poverty, forced migration or flight, natural catastrophes, threats caused by other states. The degree of uncertainty and insecurity in case of a nomadic existence was very high because of the ecological zone and the economic basis caused by the geographic conditions which elevated the level of violence in turn. This fear and anxiety causing way of existence led and even today leads to a very slow civilizational development of nomadic societies. [3] One aspect of this development is the progress of accumulated realistic knowledge based on observation and thinking with emotional detachment: Realistic knowledge and science – freedom from myths, beliefs and ideologies in explaining the nature and the cosmos – are based on a personality structure with a high degree of self-control, control of wishes, desires, emotions and feelings. Conditions of a nomadic existence hampered exactly the development of such a personality and therefore of the 5th dimension of the civilizational development.

In this article, I have tried to analyze the development of the concepts and symbols of time, spatial direction and calendar in the ancient nomadic societies of Eurasia using the civilization theoretical model of Norbert Elias on the basis of available historiography. Historical documents about nomads are certainly rare. I preferred to publish the topic in form of a series of articles consisting of 3 interrelated parts.

The concept of time was inseparable from the conditions of the nomadic existence and their cosmic imagination as well as their cult. Nomadic life is very dependent on natural occurrences such as the day and the night course or seasons. The tribal chief decided on the basis of the height of the sun, temperature or vegetation on the movement of the herds. Through such an extreme high dependence on the nature the natural occurrences determined the time.

The coordination of the sequence of social acts with the sequence of natural occurrences sufficed at this low level of civilization to determine the nomadic life. The concepts of time were in the form of “particularistic synthesis” that means at a low level of abstraction. The examination of the Eurasian languages enables to detect a development from a particularistic to a generalizing synthesis, meaning from a low level of abstraction to a higher one, from a discontinuous to a processual understanding of time. This development in the concept of time took place parallel to the civilizational development.

II. SYMBOLS OF TIME INTERVALS AND THE TIME EXPRESSIONS IN A DAY TIME

Concept of time intervals like “week”, “month” or “year” are at a higher level of synthesis or abstraction in comparison to the spot time determinations like the rising of the sun. In the Orchon-Inscriptions concepts of time interval can be found only three times:

- 1) In the Kül-tegin Inscriptions Yollyq Tegin tells us that he worked 20 days long to carve the characters,
- 2) in case of the Bilge-Khagan Inscriptions he needed one month and four days, [4]
- 3) and the third place is the description of the Chinese rule over the Göktürks for 50 years. [5]

It is amazing that in an inscription which tells about the wars the time interval words are very seldom used. In Orchon-Inscriptions the night and the day time are expressed in terms of “in the darkness” and “by lightness” in order to denote an act of longer duration: “For the Turkish people I didn’t sleep “in the darkness” and didn’t rest “in the lightness” but worked...” [6]

That means the time-interval words “day” and “night” were bound to the recurring natural events. Even today the words for “month” and “moon” (ay) are identical in Turkish. Interesting enough the words “year” (yıl), “herd” (yılkı) “newly born animals”, richness (yılıg) are etymologically of the same origin, demonstrating also how closely people and herds are in a symbiotic relationship in a nomadic society.

Similarly, in old Turkish there were no separate words for “morning” and “evening”. They were expressed in relation to the sunrise and sunset. So the morning meant “tan erte” (after the sunrise, tan means sunrise). [7] In the Kirgiz Manas-Legend the morning appears as a very colorful description of the sunrise. [8] The lack of abstraction in the determination of time and the complete identity between a natural occurrence and a concept of time repeats itself in the Dede-Korkut-Legends, in which a strong emotional engagement can be found by watching the natural event.

“When the day=the sun touches the big mountains with its beautiful breast...”

The German sociologist Norbert Elias explains in his Theory of Civilization, that at lower levels of civilization the observation and the contemplation of nature is with a high level of emotional engagement. The development of civilization means a higher control of emotions and feelings, which manifests itself in a more reserved, detached observation of nature. [9] While the time interval “morning” had differentiated time sections in relation to the position of the sun, that is 5 different expressions between the sunrise and the noon, the evening in Old Turkish did not have separate word itself, but it was expressed in relation to the movement of the sun. One said: “The sun/day went down”[10]

A more abstract time determination such as “afternoon” (ikindi) or “evening” (akşam) can be first found in the era of the Choresm-State (1092-1229), one of the small states which arose after the disintegration of great Seldchuk-Empire, in context with the namaz time (as ikindi namaz, akşam namaz: afternoon prayer, evening prayer). The last and the fifth namaz time was expressed in Old Turkish in a very egocentric and unabstract manner: “yatug ogri” or “yatagasık” meaning “shortly before going to bed”. Just as the sun and the day were expressed by the same word, night or evening meant “tün”, which actually was “darkness”. The verb to stay overnight (tünemek) in Oldturkish is derived from this word and is still used in today’s Turkish for the sleeping behavior of chickens on a branch or a stake.

At this low level of development of knowledge human beings watched the sunrise and the sunset with a higher degree of emotionality, attachment and egocentricism, with a higher degree of phantasy. [11] How the sky looked like by these natural events was thought of an indication for the coming catastrophe or luck. If the clouds reddened during the sunrise, people expected danger but in case of during the sunset it was an indication for lucky events to come. [12] “Tün” (evening/darkness) and “gün” (sun, day) as cosmic opposites were covered with affects. The sunrise appears in the Dede-Korkut stories as an event to be celebrated while the time of darkness was also the time of dangers, risks and anxiety. [13] The high levels of danger through the low level of capability to control the nature as well as to control the dangers coming from other people at this low level of civilization can be very well detected in the following lines of Dede Korkut:

“When the dark evening comes, the anxious shepherd, when the snow and rain fall... (A word which could not be translated till now)” [14]

It is no wonder that the words derived from “tün” (evening/darkness) implies anxiety and negative emotions:

Tünek: Dungeon

Tünerik: Grave

Tün was supposed to be the time when bad ghosts appear so that the shamans waited for the performance of some rites till darkness to catch them or to drive them away.

The self-relevance or in other words ego-relatedness of the time-concepts means also the low level of building a synthesis. Then the needs and the daily routine of people determine the words for the time. If we look at the word for “noon” in many Turkic dialects, we find out that it meant “rest” or “meal time”.

Even the word “kalcak” still used today for the lunch time can be traced back to the Oldkasan-Turkish meaning a piece of meat. Radloff showed in case of Kırgıs-Turkish, Mongols and Kumanturken that the word “konaklık” (rest) was used for the noon time: In the life style of middle Asian Turkic societies noon was the time to rest and eat during the many days long lasting wandering, during the wars or seasonal movements.

Another time denotion “tüş” for the noon was used synonymously for distances which would take half a day to travel. Here the time and space concepts are very closely interrelated: “Tüşlük yol” (yol=weg) meant a destination which would be arrived at till noon or in other words till resting and lunch-time. [15] Etymologically, “tüş” is derived from the verb “tüşmek”, to fall, meaning “to fall down from the horse”, to get down. Therefore “tüşlük” designates in some dialects both the noon time and the midnight since both times are related to quitting riding, to getting down for resting and eating. Neither the acts needed not to be differentiated nor the time determinations in such simple, quite homogeneous societies: the unchanging undifferentiated action of resting took place obviously twice a day. The word for time, “ödhi” besides tüşlük was introduced as late as the 11th Century although “öd” is already to be found in the Orchon-Inscriptions. But at that early time this concept did not have a connotation of an abstract and from sanctity differentiated, independent concept of time.

III. THE IDENTITY OF TIME AND SPATIAL DIRECTION CONCEPTS

The lingual identity of direction and time concepts in the early history of Turkish tribes is very informative from the view point of the sociology of knowledge: Both symbols which express the positional relationship of events or occurrences could develop as different or independent concepts only at a higher level of abstraction and knowledge creation. The nomads based their cosmic understanding and orientation as well as their religious belief on the natural recurrence of sun movement and on the sun cult. So, the spatial direction and time, both, were defined in terms of the position of the sun in the sky. They were identical. The Hsiung-Nu turned their face to the South because the sun could be seen in its highest position on the South and called the West “the right arm” and the East the “left arm”. According to the Chinese historiography both the Hsiung-Nu and the Göktürks sanctified the East where the sun rises. They greeted the sunrise. This cultic importance of the East was established also in the Mongol-Empire. Dschig Khagan climbed on top of the sacred Burkan-Kaldun Berg in order to greet the sun especially before important enterprises and events. [16] This dual vision of the world found its counterpart also in the rule and administration of all the succeeding nomadic empires as the eastern and western halves so that the empires had a structure of dual rule which played an important role in their splitting and disintegration in a short period. In the description of the wedding-ceremony of Uighur-Khagan with Chinese princesses -a Chinese wife was a means of more prestige in the nomadic empires- we find the same sanctification of the sun:

“Khagan climbed up his tower and turned his face toward the East”[17]

If we look at the sequence of these empires over the centuries we must conclude that the Middle Asiatic nomads remained at this primitive level of knowledge production and understanding of the universe for a very long time. The movement of the sun was not recognized as a natural occurrence but the sun was believed to be a person, as a sanctified God; so that the Khagans tried to avoid dangers through ritualized respect acts and secure the benevolence of the sun.

The Uighur-Empire constitutes an interesting example for the phenomenon of retardation of the mental and psychological development of people in comparison to the level of development of economy and science. Mental change is always slower than the change in the upper structure of a society. [18] The Uighur-Empire was a case of a higher developed state-formation as well as a higher level of scientific development. They knew about the natural law of repetitive movements of stars and could calculate them very precisely. How can we explain that the Uighurs achieved a higher degree of knowledge and as a basis for this development of science a higher degree of emotional detachment from the nature while they remained in their personality at the level of a highly engaged emotional observation of the universe in terms of their belief system? My hypothesis is that the rulers deliberately protected and emphasized the established socio-religious sun rites to secure a strong collective identity and the stability of his rule over the people. The monopolization of the personal greeting of the sun to secure its benevolence towered the Uighurs might have been his strong power source.

The doors of the tents of the Altaic shamans were directed to the East. The faces of the buried dead people were also toward the East. The rulers' doors of the Chitan opened also eastward. Like in many other middle Asian nomadic empires, the tribes, nomadic aristocracy and the officials in the Eastern part of the Chitan-Empire had a more privileged position and a higher rank in comparison to the Western counterparts. Interesting enough, the ruler's tents were always placed on the Eastern side of the ceremony place. [19]

Since the morning and the sunrise were believed to be a sacred time, the practicing of cults and according to the Oghuz-Legends the important social activities took place at this time although a moon cult existed besides the sun-cult. But the moon-cult became weaker and weaker in the religion of states. It is very probable that the moon-cult had originated before the arousal of the central power, that means in the epoch of hunting and gathering and primitive horticulture. In conformity with the dualistic imagination of the nature as the right and the left or day and night the Hsiung-Nu sacrificed ritually both for the sun and the moon. In religious fests the rulers greeted first the East and then the West. But his sanctity-based legitimation refers to both directions.

“In the morning Tan-Hu leaves the war camp in order to make a reverence in front of the sunrise. When the new moon appear in the West he bowed toward the moon. When he sits down his left hand is the noble side.” [20]

My hypothesis is that the moon-cult was associated with the previous earth cult, that dominated before the sun-cult. The sun-cult was associated with the sky-god and emerged afterwards. I think that the both cultic spheres existed besides each other. This explanation finds support through the following Chinese historical documents: The ruler of the Hsiung-Nu, Lao-Shang declares himself as

“The mighty Hunnen-Emperor, who was enthroned by the Sky and the Earth and who originated from the Sun and the Moon...”[21]

The Chinese Emperor should –so was the suggestion- address Modun (Hsiung-Nu Emperor) in his letter as

“the mighty Hunnen-shanyu, originated from the Sky and the Earth and who was chosen by the Sun and the Moon...” [22]

The relation between the Earth-and Moon cults becomes clear in the belief systems of the Altaic people: In case of Altaic Shamanism the rites of animal sacrificing for the water- and river-cults, both being derivations of the very early Earth cult, were directed toward the West. Since the origin of the Shamanism goes back to earlier civilizational periods and therefore includes animistic practices, these rites of sacrifice support the thesis that the Moon-Cult –the adoration of the West- had its roots in the earlier periods as the Sun-Cult. Whereas turning the face to the South had been the reference for the determination of the other 3 directions in the Hsiung-Nu-Empire, the East constituted the reference of direction in the Göktürk-Empire. The Göktürks faced the East and called this direction. “forwards” (ilgerü) or later “in front” (öng din) whereas the West was named “behind/back” (kirü, kerü). From a sociological point of view is the interpretation of Radloff is of interest: He associates the world meaning West, kirü, with the word “kuyruk”, meaning, the tail of an animal. So determined, the left side became the North and the right side the South. The basis for the determination of the 4 directions constituted the animal body, possibly of the animal to be sacrificed or of the totem animal.

So far I have tried to demonstrate the lingual and conceptual identity of the sun, direction and the time. But different nomadic groups had achieved very different levels of conceptual development that means a higher degree of abstraction, which manifests itself in the grade of differentiation between these 3 concepts.

The Yakuts in the Northern Tundra, dwelling under very difficult geographical and climatic conditions, could not achieve any major civilizational development. Interestingly they did not differentiate between the South and the East and sanctified the whole circle of movement of the sun that means the time of its appearance in the sky as a concrete body. Also the groups in the Altai-Mountains, isolated from the dynamic of civilizational change, called the South “sun side” or “the side of the day” or “the place where the sun shines”. The sun meant also the “sunny side of the mountain”. That means there was no differentiation between the body of the sun and its effect on the earth. This identity between the

- 1) Place,
- 2) Directions and
- 3) The sun as a body

depicts a primitive level of construction of concepts, of conceptualization, which goes parallel to the low level of civilization. In the nomadic groups in which there was no differentiation between the South and East, the doors of the tents opened totally undifferentiated towards the East or the South. Decisive was that the warmth of the sun could come into the tent: How tightly are the religious-cosmic thoughts of people intermingled with their concrete conditions of their existence!

In contrast to this primitive level of local terminology in the Altaic tribes the ruler's language demonstrates under the political rule of the Göktürk dynasty a higher degree of precision in naming the 4 directions, although as we have already remarked, there was still no differentiated terms for the time of the day and the cardinal directions: Just as the noon time was identical with the South (kün ortası) the Orchon-Inscriptions call the North "tün ortası", that means the "middle of the night or darkness".

The expression used by the tribes of the Northern Altai serves as a very good example for the emotion-laden, engaged and personified mood of thinking and feeling of people at a lower level of civilization and therefore their lack of control over their feelings and emotions like fear, anxiety, excitement, etc. in detecting the phenomena of nature. They called the night or the darkness "orphan of the sun/day". [23] This incapability to observe the universe and the world in a detached mood of cognition was, on the other hand, the main barrier for the development of a realistic body of knowledge about the nature. Here we see how deeply connected the personality structure and the progress of science as well as the civilizational development are.

Kirgisen demonstrate on the other hand a higher level of abstraction in naming the natural phenomena which indicated also a higher level of social integration and of centralization of power. They differentiated for example between the South-East (tüştük çigis) and the South-West (tüştük batış). [24]

But the differentiation between the determination of time and the directions was the accomplishment of the Uighurs: The Uighur-Empire developed a higher level of development of the state and civilization. Interesting enough, they could not completely free their conceptualization from the identity of time and direction because they differentiated between the time-fixation and the direction only by adding the word "ödün" for the time and "yang gak", side for the direction: [25]

Previously Identical	Derivation of the Time-Fixation	Derivation of the Direction
Kün ortu (Noon or lightness)	Kün ortu ödün	Kün ortu yang gak
Tün ortu (Midnight or darkness)	Tün ortu ödün	Tün ortu yang gak

The first historically documented mentioning of all the 8 directions as we have it today was also found in the Uighur-Empire, a very profound development in the capacity for a more abstract, cognitively complex thinking and creation of synthesis of higher level: "eight directions define the earth"[26]

The usage of the word “ödün” for the time emerged in this later history of Middle-Asia because this term appears in the Orchon-Inscriptions of the Göktürk-Empire as an attribute of “Tengri” (Kültigin-Inscription, North-Side 10-11). I must confess that there still exists disagreement about the right translation of the line “... öd tengri yasar”[27]. How can we relate the three key terms in above quotation, “öd” (time), “Tengri” (sky god) and “yasar” (to rule, to enact law). The relationship between time and time-fixation, cosmic view and rule/reign will be the content of my following part in this article series, of part II.

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[1] Norbert Elias was born on 22 June 1897 in Breslau (today: Wrocław) in a family of Jewish descent. His father Hermann Elias, married with Sophie Elias managed a textile factory. After passing the abitur (High-School diploma) in 1915 he volunteered for the German army in World War I and was employed as a telegrapher. After suffering a nervous breakdown in 1917, he was declared unfit for service and was posted to Breslau as a medical official. In 1918 began Elias studying philosophy, psychology and medicine at the University of Breslau, in addition spending a term each at the universities of Heidelberg and Freiburg in 1919 and 1920. He quit medicine in 1919 after passing the preliminary examination (Physikum). During his Breslau years, until 1925, Elias was deeply involved in the German Zionist movement. To finance his studies he took up in 1922 a job as the head of the export department in a local hardware factory. In 1924 he graduated with a doctoral dissertation in philosophy at the University of Breslau. In 1924 moved Elias to Heidelberg and resumed his studies of sociology. Alfred Weber accepted him as a candidate for a habilitation (Thesis for professorship).

In 1930 Elias chose to cancel this project and followed Karl Mannheim to become his assistant at the University of Frankfurt on the Main. He began his habilitation entitled “Der höfische Mensch” (“The Man of the Court”). His habilitation thesis was already submitted and his consuler was Mannheim, as in March 1933 Nazi rule in Germany began. After the Nazi take-over Mannheim’s Sociological Institute was forced to close and Elias’ habilitation procedure was cut. His habilitation thesis was first published in 1969 with the title “Die höfische Gesellschaft”.

In 1933, Elias fled to Paris and in 1935 to Great Britain, where he was later nationalized. Between 1954 and 1962 he worked as lecturer at the department of Sociology from University of Leicester. At that time his first enormous empirical study “Etablierte und Aussenseiter” was in progress. Before that, he worked for a long time in adult education and engaged himself in group therapy. From 1962 to 1964, Elias taught as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana. After his return to England he worked as a private scholar. Since 1975 he moved to Amsterdam and spent much time as visiting professor in various German and Dutch universities (Aachen, Münster, Bielefeld). Only now and especially after the success of the pocket edition from “Über den Prozess der Zivilization” (1976) was his work in Germany appreciated and generally recognized. From 1978 to 1984 he worked at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Bielefeld. Among others he was in the ZIF-Research Team of Philosophy and History.

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- [2] The nomadic life and economy was a barrier to this kind of social development.
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- [4] Radloff, W. (1894/9)/1987, Bd. I, S. 38, 82.
- [5] Radloff, W. (1894/9)/1987, S. 7
- [6] ibid
- [7] Ögel, B. (1984) Bd. I., 449-451
- [8] ibid, 456: “Tan agarıp attı, gün kızarıp çıktı”
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- [9] Elias, N. , 2007b. Involvement and Detachment; An Essay on Time (2007a)
- [10] Ögel, B., 1984. Bd, pg 457
- [11] ibid
- [12] Kaşgarlı, M., 1939. Ed. B. Atalay VIII, pg. 251. “Tünle bulut örtense, evlük uri keldirmişce bolur, tangda bulut örtense evge yağı kiçmişce bolur”
- Tün: Evening, darkness, sunset
- Tang: Morning, sunrise
- [13] Ergin, M. (1958/1986) pg 16
- [14] Ibid: “Karangu akşam olanda, kaygulu çoban. Kar ile yağmur yaganda camaklu(?) çoban.”
- [15] Arat, R.R., 1985, pg. 596
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- [17] Mackerras, C. (1968) pg 118
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- [24] Ibid pg 207-222
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- [26] Bang, W., Gabain, A. (1931) Volume V, pg. 323-356
- [27] Compare Radloff, W. (1894/9) 1987, Bd.I, pg 28 Thomson , W. (1924), Vol. 3, pg. 121-170, Divitçioğlu, S. (1987) p. 963.