

# Globalization of Migration

## What the Modern World Can Learn From Nomadic Cultures

By RAFIS ABAZOV

*The globalization of the modern world has stimulated a steep rise in migration to locations both near and far, supported by many factors. The development of sophisticated modern transportation systems and networks making it much easier, cheaper and faster for people to move than at any time in history has been one such factor. Yet, the social and cultural dimensions of the attitudes towards migrants and relations between locals and newcomers are not always easy and not always harmonious. In many countries around the world, migrants and migration are among the most hotly debated topics and ones that are, indeed, not easy to address. At the same time, there have been societies—such as the traditional Kazakhs—that moved constantly from one place to another and developed a whole cultural universe of social norms and perceptions around migration and movement of people. Can the modern world learn how to address the issues of migration from these nomadic cultures?*

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### MULTIPLE FACES OF MIGRATION

**O**ur modern post-industrial societies and economies require that skills, expertise and experience be mobile and easily transferable to various geographic locations both inside and outside the boundaries of nation-states, to the tune of 200 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants, as estimated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Innovation and competition, as well as rapid development of information and communication technologies and new media require speedy recruitment, deployment and redeployment of talent into specific, sometimes unpredictable, locations around the world. Yet, pre-industrial and industrial era perceptions, attitudes and social norms continue to build various barriers to population movement, such as concerns about the security of local jobs, cultural compatibility and difficulties with integration into local cultures and societies.

Nomadic cultures, unlike settled communities in pre-industrial and industrial eras, have had to deal constantly with various aspects of migration. Take, for example, the nomads in the Kazakh culture. They had to deal with economic, cultural and social aspects of population movement. Nomadic societies, however, have tended to manage priorities in quite different ways. Unlike modern industrial and post-industrial societies where economic considerations rule, nomadic societies often prioritize cultural and social dimensions and only incorporate the economic aspects after that.

When people come together they communicate with each other in certain ways and according to certain cultural traditions. Cultural identity—belonging to certain groups or cultures—increasingly plays a significant role in formulating individual and collective attitudes and in the inclusion or



exclusion of people into various cultural arenas or environments. These cultural aspects might take different forms and have different impacts on relations between different individuals and communities, and especially between receiving communities and migrants when it comes to language, dress code, culinary habits and cultural symbols. The nomadic societies have understood this and accordingly established a whole set

one region and failing in others, and with it fortunes and job markets. Migration, if managed effectively, may revitalize some localities and energize communities. Nomads understood the importance of giving migrants an opportunity to travel freely and to offer their skills and expertise on the Great Silk Road, with what would be the equivalent of our working visas and work permits, to enrich their countries.



Kazakhs people, Xinjiang, China.

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of traditions and rituals on treating migrants and on hospitality regulated not only at the state level, but most importantly at the community level.

The social aspect is another important dimension of this process, as all participants—the receiving communities as well as the newcomers—have to deal with a myriad of social issues. On the one side, this includes consideration of societal norms, established social relations and the traditional fabric of the society. On the other side, the citizens have to deal with the social perceptions and traditions of newcomers, their ways of dealing with social relations and building social connections.

The economic aspect plays a significant role in creating or illuminating barriers. It is true that this is an aspect where there exists great inequality, with the economy expanding in

## MULTIPLE IMPACTS OF MIGRATION

The most important feature in traditional Kazakh culture and art is the perception of the universe through the eyes of a nomad. In this view, nomadism is not only a way of life, but also a way of thinking about the world around oneself, about circles of life, about interactions with Mother Nature and the never-ending movement of the human soul. According to this view, the human soul should always search for perfect balance, both in the real world and in the imaginary philosophical construction of the world.

Nomads have to deal with constant movement of people including themselves and those around them. Therefore, they have developed certain concepts or attitudes in dealing with migration and related issues.





Kaindy Lake in southeast Kazakhstan.

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
One such attitude is cultural curiosity. In nomadic culture it is a norm to explore 'otherness' and various aspects of cultural differences without precondition or pre-established prejudice, learning from newcomers about the land beyond the horizon and about new skills and technologies.

A second important attitude is tolerance. The nomadic societies on the Great Silk Road usually accepted newcomers with a great degree of tolerance to differences in religious views, language, dress code and many other issues.

Third is social attitude. Kazakhstan, like the United States, has been a country of migrants for centuries and people developed and integrated into their social norms certain ways of dealing with migrants. These social attitudes have been valued and promoted among all members of the society.

#### WHAT CAN THE MODERN WORLD LEARN FROM NOMADIC CULTURES?

The UNDP *Human Development Report 2009, Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* suggests that global migration is here to stay and even grow both internationally and domestically, stressing that "history and contemporary evidence suggest that development and migration go hand in hand".<sup>1</sup> For decades, migration has been among the

most important and most discussed topics for national governments and international organizations, which have worked on developing policy measures and policy tools in order to ease and harmonize population movement and to deal with conflicts and many other issues related to migration. Yet, there is still much to be learned from the experiences of the past and present, including those of nomadic societies such as the Kazakhs. In this regard, one of the most important lessons is to accord more attention to the cultural dimension of migration and, through greater cultural exchanges, promote sharing of values and better dialogue between receiving and arriving communities. In addition, the economic and social policies developed by national governments and regional and international organizations should also give greater consideration to learning about cultural values and traditions. This, in turn, will help to create better policies and more bottom-up actions in dealing with the ever growing global movement of people and cultures. 

#### Notes

- 1 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.2.

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