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Abay's Legacy to the Philosophy of Education

PETER SHON

As early as the nineteenth century, Abay Kunanbayev foresaw the need to adapt to the world being altered by the hands of geopolitical powers. Rather than to be swept away by the waves of colonial influences, he became the lonely voice in the wilderness urging the Kazakhs to become educated multilingually. Though Abay is revered as the country's foremost philosopher and poet, his writings are mostly covered in secondary school Kazakh Literature courses; though often quoted, the work of Abay is seldom read in its entirety. In addition, information about the impact of his writings on present-day educators in Kazakhstan is lacking. The purpose of this paper is to describe and juxtapose the main ideas in Abay's *The Book of Words*, first published in 1909, with various philosophers from the West to examine the relevance of his philosophy in today's Kazakhstani society. This paper is a historical description which seeks to answer the metaphysical, epistemological, and pedagogical questions under the themes of man, knowledge, and education. This study will contribute to bringing a further spotlight on Abay, not only as a steppe philosopher and poet of the past, but as a philosopher in education for contemporary Kazakh society.

Keywords: Abay, man, knowledge, soul, education

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has been making progress in all major sectors of society. Under the vision of education reform targeted for the year 2050, trilingual policy (Kazakh, Russian, and English) was adopted to propel the country to join the top 30 developed countries in the world. Yet as early as the nineteenth century, Abay Kunanbayev foresaw the need to adapt to the world being altered by the hands of geopolitical powers. Rather than to be swept away by the waves of colonial influences, he became the lonely voice in the wilderness urging the Kazakhs to become educated multilingually. Though Abay is revered as the country's foremost philosopher and poet, his writings are mostly covered in Kazakh Literature Course for secondary schools; though often quoted, the work of Abay is seldom read in its entirety. In addition, information about the impact of his writings on present-day educators in Kazakhstan is lacking. The purpose of this paper is to describe and juxtapose the main ideas in Abay's *The Book of Words*, first published in 1909, with various philosophers from the West to examine the relevance of his philosophy in today's Kazakh society. This paper is a historical description which seeks to answer the metaphysical, epistemological, and pedagogical questions under the themes of man, knowledge, and education. First, what is the nature of man according to Abay? Second, how did Abay define knowledge? Lastly, how should Kazakhs be educated? Though this paper anticipates some commonality and practical applications for today's educators, due to the religious, cultural, and historical context of Abay's time, limitations for discussion may exist for certain topics such as democracy and feminism. In addition, because the words of Abay were translated from Perso-Arabic script to Cyrillic Kazakh, then to Russian and English, some words and meanings may have been altered. Lastly, there is lack of research information written about Abay in English. This study will contribute to bringing a further spotlight on Abay, not only as a steppe philosopher and poet of the past, but as a philosopher in education for contemporary Kazakh society.

Abay and Kazakhstan

Abay (Ibrahim) Kunanbayev was born in 1845 in Chingiz of the Semipalatinsk region in what is today's Abay district of East Kazakhstan Oblast in the Republic of Kazakhstan. He was also called Abay which means 'to be careful' in the Kazakh language. He lived up to his name during the tumultuous time in Kazakh history; as the sage (teacher) and *bey* (leader) of his tribe, Abay was responsible for balancing on the political tightrope held together on one side by the laws of the steppes, governed by nomadic tradition and the Islamic Sharia Law, and on the other side by the rules of the Russian Czar. Though various faiths coexisted peacefully on the Silk Road commercial routes, Islam prevailed as the dominant religion when Genghis Khan and his Golden Horde began to rule Central Asia in the thirteenth century. Kazakhs also sought the protectorate power of the Russian

Empire before the time of Peter the Great due to deadly conflicts with neighboring Dzhungars in the eighteenth century (Esenberlin, 2015). Rather than to continue the legacy of violence and turmoil, Kunanbayev (2005) “eschewed the realities that surrounded him, and extricated himself from the oppressive atmosphere of feudalism and lawlessness” (p. 10). He chose the path toward peace and desired to raise the status of Kazakhs, not by the military resistance against the colonial power, but by mastering the knowledge of the West. Abay envisioned Kazakhs to someday have equal footing not only with Russians but with the rest of the world via education.

While Seisenbaev, who published the work of Abay, describes him as a “great poet, musician, translator, philosopher and political activist” (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 8), contemporary Kazakh philosopher Nysanbayev (2009) views him as a “many-sided, versatile and ambiguous figure in the history of Kazakh philosophy” (p. 20). Abay was not necessarily appreciated or understood by Kazakhs of his time because he was anticipating a globalized future that others could not fathom. Abay was unique because he stood simultaneously on Eastern traditions of spirituality and Western traditions of rationality. He was the first Kazakh philosopher to synthesize Western ideas with Central Asian needs to “unite organically the wisdom of the East and the progressive ideas of the West” (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 11). Though grounded in Islamic faith of the East, Abay gave anecdotes from philosophers of the West—he studied the classic works of Greece and Rome as well as contemporary philosophers including Kant, Hegel, and Darwin. He also translated various works of the West into the Kazakh language including “poems by Mikhail Lermontov, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Lord Byron, Ivan Krylov, and Alexander Pushkin,” according to the National Academic Library and Semipalatinsk Library named after Abai (Abai Kunabaev, n.d.).

Synthesis of the East and West meant guarding the traditions of the past yet seeking liberally about the prospects for the future. It also meant thinking critically toward the religious establishment even though he was a devout Muslim. Recognizing the limitations of religious training, Abay sought to “criticize everything related to the blind faith and the fear of God produced by external, in this instance, superficial aspects of faith and religious practice” (Nysanbayev, p. 22). Abay wanted people to think for themselves. To be enlightened was not for the sole purpose of striving for independence per se from the protectorate power of the Russian empire, but for the liberation of their minds and for their progeny to become masters of their own destiny. Abay was “deeply concerned about the issues of self-determination of the Kazakh people” (Nysanbayev, p. 22) as he “relentlessly placed the question of the fate of *Kazakhia* before his people” (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 14). Abay concluded that education would allow the Kazakhs to be truly free (the word *kazakh* means ‘to be free’ in the Turkic language).

Abay's Definition of Man

If the “membership of the polis” (Johnson & Reed, 2014, p. 45) with its shared living gave foundation to Socrates and defined who he was (p. 45), then the nomadic life in the steppes of Central Asia gave foundations to and defined Abay Kunabayev. For Abay, it was the community which defined Kazakhs because “a man or a woman could never survive alone in the steppes unless there was a community who could shelter the individual from the beasts and brutal elements” (Kunanbayev, p. 78). Belonging to the community was a matter of survival, and it determined the balance of life and death in the steppes. Abay believed that the Kazakh’s “national characteristic” (p. 78) hung on this sense of community where “people treasured their unity as the holy of holies” (p. 168). He placed the well-being of the community above the well-being of the individual, very much like a Confucian. Though part of Abay’s community existed within the confines of villages, others lived out in the open steppes where changing seasons and needs of their flocks dictated when the community mobilized. Life meant assembling and disassembling the *yurts*, traveling together in a caravan, and guarding the flocks against the beasts on behalf of the whole community. A social contract based on survival tied the individuals to work together, to share responsibility, and to cherish egalitarian principles. For Abay, man could not be defined apart from the community.

Unfortunately, during his time, this sacred unity within the Kazakh community was eroding (Kunanbayev, p. 78). There was a crisis that threatened both the national and cultural identities of the nomads due to growing disparity between the poor and the wealthy (p. 78). The rich disregarded “honor, conscience, and sincerity” (p. 94), and people became estranged and hostile toward one another (p. 82). Abay sought to remedy

the fractured community by reminding the people about the traditions of their ancestors, by encouraging Kazakhs to work earnestly, by turning to faith, and by writing in depth about the importance of education. Many Kazakhs of Abay's generation thought previous generations were "inferior to the present...in learning, civility, neatness, and tidiness" (p. 167), even though their forefathers managed without judges and saw themselves as one family where wealth was held in common (p. 168). Abay reasoned that Kazakhs did not know about true happiness because instead of appreciating life, they were wasting their time with "quarrels and miserable wrangles" (p. 86). Abay urged his people to be reflective about their existence as the "sands of life" (p.86) slipped away. Pascal once defined a man as a 'fragile thinking reed', and in a similar manner, Abay spoke about the quickness and fragility of life. As with the prophet Job, Abay lamented that "man comes crying into this world and departs it in sorrow" (p. 86).

Abay wrote feverishly to find solace in "how he should live out his days" (Kunanbayev, p.78). If Socrates challenged his students to "Know Thyself," then Abay urged his people to "*adam bol*" or to "be a man" (Nysanbayev, p. 21). As described in the Book of Genesis, Abay believed that "God separated man from beast by breathing the soul into him" (Kunanbayev, p. 92). Man was then a divine being first and foremost. Abay believed in the "existence of one God, unique and omnipotent" (p. 181), but he also recognized the universality in religions, in "love and justice as the attributes of God" (p. 181). Abay believed that man is not only accountable to the Creator, but responsible to his fellow men. The responsibility of humanity was then to carry out this love and justice, even though people differed in the way they understood God (p. 181). In his discourse of ethics, Emmanuel Levinas described, "inasmuch as one is aware that one is responsible for the other, that the existence of the other is more important than one's own" (cited by Egéa-Kuehne, 2012, p. 29). Abay would have agreed with Levinas that the needs of the community were greater than the needs of an individual. He argued that leading a selfless life was equal to cultivating the powers of the human soul, and without it, human beings were no different from animals (Kunanbayev, p. 176).

Man was a part of and an extension of the community which gave him protection as well as his sense of identity; man could not be defined apart from his community as he could not exist without it. Mending the fracture within the community required Abay to reach out to the individuals to remind them about their spiritual responsibility toward the Creator and their moral obligation to the others. Abay desired to burden others with the same sense of urgency and responsibility toward their community. The path toward becoming a man started by recognizing his own mortality and by seeing the needs of others before his own. Becoming a man was not only the process of physical maturity but of the spiritual one, in which the sense of duty for others would become the force to move the community toward oneness.

Knowledge and Soul

For Abay, knowledge was not something ephemeral, but tangible and categorical; knowledge was contained in human character within the soul to serve the divine will of the Creator. What is a soul? St. Augustine and Abay both recognized that "everything we perceive, we perceive either through a sense of the body or by the mind" (as cited in Johnson & Reed, 2014, p. 49). Therefore, the soul was the representative of the mind. Abay agreed with St. Augustine that ideas were formulated by experiences gained through the five senses, and these ideas were imprinted in the "human mind according to definite pattern and produces a certain imagery" (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 175). Whereas Abay defined the body as "the house of the soul" (p. 91), which desired "food, drink and sleep, soul has the natural desire to see and learn for intelligence and learning" (p. 91), St. Augustine categorized the body and soul as "the former sensible, the latter intelligible...former carnal, and the latter spiritual" (as cited in Johnson & Reed, p. 49). Located within the soul, "human character was [then] a vessel containing intelligence and knowledge" (Kunanbayev, p. 140).

If the carnal nature of a man was to develop apart from the soul, then he would be no different than animals; man would become complete only when the soul was cultivated by knowledge. Abay believed that there were three functioning properties of the human soul (Kunanbayev, p. 176): it is reflective, intelligent, and protective. Because one of the mechanism of the soul was to protect the heart, Abay further distinguished the soul from the heart. Reason functioned to "distinguish the beneficial from the harmful" (p. 178), but it had its limitations, unless it combined with the strong will. As Abay explains, "a man combining reason and will power will be like a swift Arab horse, he will have dominion over everything" (p. 178). In the past, the Central Asian

steppes were subjugated by conquerors with an iron will, but because they lacked reason, evil prevailed. By the same token, leaders who possessed reason lacked that iron will to have dominion over evil. Therefore, Abay stressed that ruler of Kazakhstan should possess both reason and will. If reason comes from developing the soul, then where does the will come from?

Abay passed away before he witnessed the chaotic rise and the dissolution of the Soviet Union which placed Kazakhstan under its domain for more than fifty years. Instead of the familiar tribal rule that came from the East as with Mongols, Moscow wielded systematic and formal power from the West. When Kazakhstan became independent in 1991, leaders of the country faced uncertainty and chaos. They sought council from other nations that overcame similar political and economic crisis, including Singapore. Late Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore believed that the rulers of Singapore needed to have strong will for their survival. During his famous speech at a rally in Raffles place, Lee proclaimed, "Whoever governs Singapore must have that iron in him. Or give it up." (MFAS, 2015, para. 4). He believed that this tough trait as well as intelligence was determined biologically. As with many societies influenced by Confucius, Lee placed the importance on nature rather than nurture to take precedence in determining success even though he was later criticized for being an elitist (Wee, 1995). He believed that "intelligence was inherited and not the result of education, food, and training" (Lee, 2000, p. 137). Abay, on the other hand, thought that will could also be cultivated as with reason.

Abay aligned more closely with John Dewey who believed that nurture would have a greater role in determining success. Dewey "did not believe that children are born good...nor sinful" (cited in Noddings, 2007, p. 16). Jean-Jacques Rousseau also wanted the nature to take its course rather than to predetermine the child to be good or bad (Johnson & Reed 2014). Abay, Dewey, and Rousseau all placed greater importance on nurture (cultivating and guiding) over nature (child's innate ability). Abay believed that "child is not born a reasonable being...[and he] learns what is good and what is bad" (p. 114). Dewey also believed that "children are born with the potential for good and evil and that transaction with an educational or mis-educational environment would direct them toward one or the other" (as cited in Noddings, 2007, p. 16). It is important to mention that both Dewey and Abay recognized the power of inquiry which was a part of the nature of the soul, and that "[n]atural desire of the soul is to crave knowledge and man is naturally attracted and excited by the fascinating things around him" (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 91). Therefore, it is "not enough to be endowed with a brain" (p. 114) but cultivation in education is necessary. Knowledge was sought after by the soul, and the balance of will, reason, and heart defined a man. They worked in conjunction with the knowledge toward a greater purpose of serving others. Abay thought one should never seek to gain knowledge for the sake of profit, but on the contrary, one should use wealth to acquire more knowledge. Gaining knowledge was its own reward. The purpose of obtaining knowledge was so that it "ought to serve justice and conform to the demands of the divine law" (p. 162). For Abay, knowledge should be pursued like the prized wild horses in the steppes. When Kazakhs possessed and appreciated knowledge, it would then serve its master like a good steed.

Education for Kazakhs

Though Abay did not speak in depth about pedagogy, he recognized that children were capable of having great aspirations. Abay also spoke about holistic learning which allowed a person to 'become complete'. As mentioned above, complete knowledge enabled the learners to serve the divine law. To realize the aspiration, the child should listen to the words of wise men and by "memorizing the teachings of the learnt and by avoiding vices, one can grow up a complete person" (Kunanbayev, p. 114). There was logic behind this sentiment since too many Kazakhs tended to go astray as mentioned earlier. In such cases, students were blamed for "the lack of courage and staunchness in their heart to accept and follow wise counsels" (p. 106). When it came to the question of personally educating children, he answered, that it "is beyond my powers" (p. 79). This humble stance veiled a hidden blueprint and great ambition to transform Kazakhstan through education.

What sort of education did Abay envision? "One should learn to read and write Russian" (Kunanbayev, p. 125) would have been the first answer. This was not because he held the Russian language to be superior to the Kazakh language, but because having access to the Russian language meant gaining greater access to the West, and to the rest of the world. Even though many Kazakhs spoke Russian, Abay felt that they were not taking full advantage of studying for scholarship and science; instead, they were simply content being translators (p. 125). Abay viewed the Russian language as the great equalizer for his people since the "Russian language is a

key to spiritual riches and knowledge, the arts and many other treasures. Russian opens our eyes to the world. By studying the language and culture of other nations, a person becomes their equal” (p. 125). We can only speculate about his view on the English language today, but since he believed that learning and culture are a key to the world heritage (p. 125), it is safe to conclude that Abay would have fully favored the implementation of the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan. Abay did not want the Kazakhs to be left out of progress while the rest of the world passed them by.

John Dewey wrote that teaching was more than a profession, but a spiritual calling in which the schools were social institutions which ushered in the new kingdom of God, along with teachers as the new prophets. Though students were responsible for learning, teachers played a central role as facilitators in the classroom and added greatly to the educational experience (Johnson & Reed, 2014). Though Dewey does not say much about the responsibility of the learner, Abay placed greater importance on the learner over the teachers or on the educational institution. While the West continued to explore the opportunities to improve learning by investing in education (facility, curriculum, etc.), the East placed greater importance on the attitudes of the learners. Responsibility of learning was placed more on the shoulders of the students than the teachers.

Abay defined the differences between the educated and non-educated (Kunanbayev, 2005, p. 107) by stating that educated persons would occupy themselves with worthy and serious matters, and they would steadfastly pursue their objectives. These individuals would have few regrets in life (p. 107) and would show poise and restraint even during the most critical times (p. 108). Whereas educated persons would be reflective about their lives, ignorant people would occupy themselves with trivial things. Abay also realized that for the Kazakhs to become educated, they needed to command respect by cultivating social and cultural norms. With social and cultural capital at hand, Abay hoped that someday a leader with sufficient influence and resources would apply his or her own vision in reforming Kazakhstan. It had to be someone who wielded “great power and immense influence” and “enormous riches” to convince all parents to send their children to school (p. 171). This was Abay’s vision for Kazakhstan: the nation would be gathered around a strong leader forged with reason and will; this leader would not only be wealthy and influential, but he or she would drive the Kazakhs to be educated; and this leader would provide the necessary education for holistic advancements for all Kazakhstanis by creating academic institutions for the community. Both Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and Nazarbayev University were established for the purposes of educational reform and progress, and if these academic institutions are indicators of increased education attainment for the country, perhaps there’s a fulfillment of Abay’s legacy in Kazakhstan today.

Summary

Abay championed education for Kazakhstan because he hoped to bring the community together, to keep Kazakhs on the right path, and to offer self-determination. Education was the key to do the will of the Creator and to free the minds of Kazakhs from colonial influences. For Abay to declare that “it would be good if Kazakh children could get an education” (Kunanbayev, p. 124) was a major understatement. He believed that the door to the rest of the world was education via the power of language, perhaps because he sensed the world becoming globalized early on. In the past, Kazakhs needed to adapt to the achievements of Russians to escape their vices. Today, Kazakhstanis contend with adapting to the English language as the lingua franca of the world as they are forced to compete with the rest of the world in the same pool of talents with the likes of China, Japan, and South Korea. Abay passed away before he witnessed the chaotic rise and fall of the Soviet Union, but as people of Kazakhstan began to search for their spiritual and national identity after independence, Abay’s writings became more relevant and vital to their link to the past as well as their path to the future. First, Abay inspired Kazakhs to embrace nationalism and to imagine the possibility of autonomy from the Russians. Second, educators and leaders carried the ideals and hopes of Abay throughout the time of their independence. At present, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has become the embodiment of the leader who would reform for the country with education. As Kazakhstan sets the course of educational reform for 2050, ‘knowmads’ of the information age owe much gratitude to the philosopher and poet of the steppe who foresaw the global future.

Conclusion

This paper looked at three main points of Abay Kunanbayev's *Book of Words* in historical description. Concerns about the Kazakhs prompted Abay to define man as being divine and as an extension of the community. The way to manhood meant cultivation of the soul via the obtainment of proper knowledge. The path toward obtainment of knowledge conveyed providing education for all and mastering other languages to become academically competent. At times Abay took the position of the West as in favoring nurture over nature, while in other times he took the position of the East as in placing greater responsibility on the learner than the educator. Abay is relevant to today's educators because even though he looked further toward the future than his contemporaries in setting the path for educational progress, many challenges that haunted him continue to linger. Future generations of Kazakhs would do well to give heed to this philosopher of the steppes whose legacy seems to continue.

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