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From Experience to Meaning: Philosophical Limits of Interpretation in Ethnographic Knowledge

Sayagul Akapova [1], Raikhan Doszhan [2,*], Garifolla Yessim [1], Ulbossyn Aimbetova [3] and Manifa Sarkulova [1]

[1] Department of Philosophy, L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana 010008, Kazakhstan; akapovasaya@gmail.com (S.A.); garifollaesim@mail.ru (G.Y.)
[2] Faculty of Arts, Kazakh National Academy of Choreography, Astana 010000, Kazakhstan
[3] Higher School of Arts and Humanities, Astana International University, Astana 010000, Kazakhstan; aim_bat@mail.ru
* Correspondence: raihan_kazbekovna@mail.ru

Abstract

Background: Within anthropology, ethnography is primarily understood as an empirical method for describing culture, while its philosophical and epistemological aspects have been largely neglected. The present article uses Khalel Argynbayev's ethnographic corpus as a specific object and asks what philosophical reflection on this work can reveal about how ethnographic knowledge of Kazakh culture is produced. **Methods**: The authors analysed five major works of Argynbayev and selected two (1973 and 1999) for close textual analysis. The analysis applies the Interpretive Ethnographic Knowledge Model (IEKM) and moves from empirical engagement through textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, and historical consciousness before concluding in reflexive evaluation. We followed the path from cultural experience as represented in ethnographic writing to conceptual knowledge within historically specific disciplinary frames of interpretation. **Results**: In Argynbayev's writings, ethnographic knowledge is established not solely by observation but also through conceptual mediation. His texts were produced within Soviet ethnographic institutions and meet their empirical expectations, yet his treatment of genealogy, ritual and family structure carries an interpretive dimension that goes beyond plain documentation. The concepts of the researcher and empirical material mutually shape each other so that the resulting knowledge depends on its historical context. **Conclusions**: Ethnography may therefore be considered a special type of humanities knowledge that connects empirical observation with philosophical interpretation. While earlier studies have primarily considered the works of Argynbayev as descriptive sources, here they are read as a space in which the operations of interpretive knowledge become evident. On this reading, the difficulty of turning represented cultural experience into concepts is a philosophical problem and not only a question of method.

Keywords: philosophy of ethnography; kazakh ethnography; epistemology of ethnography; interpretive ethnography; hermeneutic methodology; Khalel Argynbayev

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1. Introduction

Ethnographic knowledge is always produced somewhere: in particular institutions, at particular moments, and under conditions that affect how a culture is documented and how it is later read. In Central Asia, Soviet and then post-Soviet scholarship shaped ethnographic research through its academic institutions, its political frameworks and its changing ideas of cultural identity.

Kazakh ethnography is a clear example. Studies of kinship, custom, material culture and social organisation became important sources for understanding cultural continuity and collective memory [1,2] Anyone who wants to treat ethnography as a philosophical problem therefore has to look at the historical conditions of its production as well as at questions of meaning. Ethnography grew out of the empirical recording of kinship systems, rituals, economic life and symbolic forms, and the question of how it conceptualises and interprets cultural meaning has received comparatively little attention, even though ethnography is central to the humanities [3,4].

Philosophically, ethnography remains underdeveloped as a problem of knowledge. Most discussions concentrate on fieldwork procedures and say less about the conditions under which cultural meaning can be understood at all. This article starts from a different assumption: ethnography is a way of thinking organised by interpretation, and description is only one part of it. Three questions follow. How does a researcher turn cultural experience, as an ethnographer has represented it, into conceptual knowledge? Where are the limits of objectivity in cultural description? And how far do historically situated frameworks of interpretation shape what ethnography can know? These questions bring ethnography into contact with epistemology, hermeneutics and the philosophy of culture.

Our material is Argynbayev's written corpus. We have no access to his fieldwork, and we do not try to reconstruct the lived experience of the people he described. What we examine is how cultural practices are documented and represented in his writing, and how those representations can be read philosophically. For this reason the analysis keeps four levels apart: lived cultural experience, the ethnographer's observation and documentation, the textual representation, and our own philosophical interpretation. Read in this way, the corpus suggests that ethnographic knowledge takes shape through interpretation, as represented experience becomes conceptual understanding through symbolic analysis, historical interpretation and the reflexivity of the researcher. The limits of objectivity are then not a failure of knowledge. They show the conditions under which cultural meaning becomes intelligible in the first place. This is close to Gadamer's [5] idea of the fusion of horizons, in which understanding grows out of a dialogue between a historical tradition and a present-day reader.

Three bodies of theory frame the argument: Geertz's view of culture as a web of meanings, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and Bourdieu's critique of objectivity, with its account of how social practice is organised through habitus and symbolic power. They matter for Argynbayev in particular because he wrote in an academic setting where scientific objectivity, cultural representation and institutional knowledge production were tightly bound together, so his texts have to be read for their historical conditions as well as for their symbolic content. These approaches have rarely been brought to bear on Central Asian ethnographic traditions [6–8]. Argynbayev's studies of family and marriage, livestock economy, genealogy, handicrafts and the traditional culture of life support are usually read as empirical–historical records. A closer reading shows that they also address, often implicitly, questions of meaning, tradition and cultural continuity, and that they reconstruct the symbolic logic of Kazakh society instead of simply listing practices. Argynbayev conducted research mainly during the Soviet period, when scholarship valued empirical documentation but operated within broader ideological and academic frameworks. His works are best read as historically situated knowledge production, through which practices, collective memory and social meanings were both recorded and interpreted. We do not attempt a universal epistemology of ethnography. The corpus is treated as a bounded case in which questions of interpretation, historical understanding, symbolic meaning and cultural knowledge can be examined closely, and our claims stay tied to that case while speaking to wider philosophical debates.

The study's contribution is the Interpretive Ethnographic Knowledge Model (IEKM), which we developed while re-reading Argynbayev's corpus. None of its components is new on its own: empirical engagement, symbolic mediation, historical consciousness and reflexive interpretation all have established places in the literature. What the model adds is an account of how they connect, and of how ethnographic material can answer back to the philosophical concepts applied to it. Argynbayev's treatment of genealogy is a good example. There, symbolic meaning is hard to separate from historical continuity, so Geertz's symbolic analysis has to be read alongside Gadamer's historical consciousness. In his writings ethnography works as hermeneutic mediation more than as a neutral register of tradition, and empirical material and conceptual structure cannot be cleanly pulled apart. The question of truth in ethnography thus turns into a question of understanding, and the limits of understanding mark the boundaries of ethnographic knowledge. IEKM describes five interdependent dimensions. Empirical engagement identifies a practice; textual mediation shows how the ethnographic text represents it; symbolic interpretation reconstructs its meaning; historical consciousness places that meaning within a tradition; and reflexive evaluation asks under what conditions the interpretation can count as legitimate. The textual analysis in Section 3.6 is meant to show the model at work.

Hermeneutics and interpretive anthropology have a large literature, but few studies have tried to reconstruct the philosophical structure of ethnographic knowledge from a single corpus produced outside the main Western anthropological traditions. Work in this area tends to stay either with abstract philosophical debate or with comparative anthropological theory, and it pays little attention to how epistemological arguments arise from historically grounded regional ethnographies. We do not claim to offer a general theory of ethnography. The study is a philosophically informed case study, and it puts forward three propositions. First, ethnographic knowledge is an interpretive reconstruction of social reality, not a passive copy of it. Second, its epistemological authority comes from the interplay of empirical observation, symbolic mediation and historical consciousness, not from observation alone. Third, the philosophical significance of ethnography lies in the way it turns textually represented cultural experience into knowledge that can be grasped conceptually. Hermeneutics, interpretive anthropology and reflexive sociology are usually discussed as separate traditions; IEKM brings them into one account of how ethnographic knowledge is formed in a specific Central Asian context. Bourdieu's [9] point that knowledge carries the imprint of the interpreter's social and intellectual position fits well with this aim.

Methodologically, the article is an analytical case study. Argynbayev's corpus serves as a theoretically informative case for examining questions of interpretation, cultural meaning and ethnographic knowledge. We do not aim at conclusions valid for ethnography as a whole. The goal is to show what a philosophical reading of one historically grounded regional corpus can add to current epistemological discussion, and in particular how ethnography can be understood as a mode of knowledge in which cognition, interpretation and cultural meaning meet.

Historically, we place Argynbayev's legacy in three connected phases. The first is the institutional formation of Soviet Kazakh ethnography, when research was organised within formal academic structures. The second is Argynbayev's own work during the Soviet period, which documented family, genealogy, economy and material culture. The third is the re-reading of his legacy since independence, when his works became significant again in debates over cultural memory, identity and indigenous knowledge. In this framework, we can track the path by which ethnographic knowledge moves from documentation to philosophical interpretation.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues three objectives:

(1) To trace the epistemological implications for ethnographic knowledge of a philosophical–historical reading of Khalel Argynbayev's corpus.
(2) To study how the processes of hermeneutic interpretation, symbolic analysis and reflexivity give shape to cultural meaning in Argynbayev's writings.
(3) To explore the philosophical implications of Argynbayev's corpus as a bounded case, and to show how engagement with ethnographic texts on a regional scale can speak to contemporary debates in hermeneutics and philosophy without making universal claims.

Historical Scope of the Study

The study places Argynbayev's corpus within the development of Kazakh ethnographic knowledge from the Soviet period to the years after independence. The main focus is the period from the 1960s to the 1990s, when Argynbayev wrote his major works within Soviet academic ethnography. We also consider how his legacy has been read since 1991, as his works came to matter in discussions of cultural memory, national identity and the production of indigenous knowledge.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnography, Objectivity, and the Epistemic Limits of Description

The review below does not survey these philosophers for the sake of completeness. Each is used for a specific epistemological function. Gadamer explains the historical conditions of understanding; Ricoeur shows how a text acquires meanings independent of its author; Geertz offers a way of interpreting symbolic practices; and Bourdieu (1977) [9] draws attention to the social conditions under which knowledge is produced. These are analytical functions. We do not claim that the four traditions, taken separately, make up IEKM. The model concerns how the functions relate to one another when they are applied to a bounded corpus, and it is in that form that they guide the Sections 3 and 4.

The critique of positivist objectivity marked a turning point in the epistemology of ethnography. Older anthropological methods assumed that cultural phenomena could be perceived impartially and described objectively. Interpretive anthropology challenged that assumption and argued that cultural description always involves interpretation [10,11]. Geertz's distinction between thin and thick description is central here. In his words, 'The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs' [10] (p. 5). The statement moves ethnography away from recording behaviour and towards interpreting symbolic systems, and it is what allows us to read Argynbayev's descriptions of kinship, family and material culture as symbolic structures. Thin description records what can be seen; thick description interprets the meanings that make behaviour intelligible. Geertz adds that 'What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' [10] (p. 9). Evidence in ethnography is already interpretive before a philosopher touches it, which is why we approach Argynbayev's corpus as an interpretive construction of Kazakh cultural reality. Geertz's well-known example of the wink makes the same point. At the level of physical observation, a contraction of the eyelid looks identical, yet it may be a twitch, a signal or a parody, depending on the symbolic context [10] (pp. 6–10). Genealogy, marriage, crafts and family ritual function in a similar way: their meaning arises only when read in the context of the Kazakh symbolic system.

The most striking evidence of this turn is afforded by Argynbayev's own analysis of Kazakh society, which consistently demonstrates that cultural phenomena cannot be reduced to mere descriptive facts [12]. In Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People he

treats kinship and marriage both as social institutions and as carriers of cultural values and collective norms [4,12,13]. His later Kazakh Family presents family traditions as historically formed patterns of meaning embedded in social life. Taken together, these works suggest that ethnographic knowledge grows out of engagement with cultural practice more than out of detached observation [1,13–16]. Ethnography therefore holds an unusual place in the humanities. It does not look for general laws, as natural science does; it reconstructs how societies give meaning to their social relations and identities [15,17]. Western interpretive approaches are useful here, but a Central Asian corpus carries culturally and historically specific meanings that general theoretical formulas may miss, which is one more reason for treating Argynbayev's work as a case and not as a representative sample. In this article, ethnographic knowledge means an interpretive reconstruction of cultural meaning, following Geertz and the hermeneutics of Ricoeur. By interpretation we mean the dialogue through which a researcher works through symbolic material to uncover its layers of meaning. Cultural meaning is the historically transmitted symbolic logic embedded in social practice, and reflexivity is the researcher's critical awareness of their own historical and conceptual position, in the sense used by Gadamer and Bourdieu. These working definitions guide our reading of Argynbayev's accounts of kinship, genealogy and economic life, where observations become intelligible only through their symbolic and historical significance.

2.2. Hermeneutics and the Historical Condition of Understanding

Philosophical hermeneutics gives ethnographic research an important point of reference. For Gadamer, understanding is historically conditioned. It is shaped by traditions and by horizons of meaning that are already in place, and interpretation takes place as a dialogue between the interpreter and the cultural object, the process he calls the fusion of horizons [5]. His argument undercuts the idea that a researcher can approach culture from a position of complete neutrality. In Truth and Method he writes that 'understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves' [5] (p. 305): understanding occurs when the interpreter's historical horizon meets that of the text. A related notion is wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein (effective historical consciousness). Interpreters never arrive at a text free of preconceptions, and these Vorurteile (prejudgements) are not simply obstacles: 'Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth' [5] (p. 277). All understanding starts from them. This lends credence to our own reflexive stance in which we acknowledge the historical position of the interpreter rather than deny it. The fusion of horizons does not erase historical difference. In encountering another horizon, the interpreter's own horizon shifts, and understanding works with historical distance instead of abolishing it. Applied to ethnography, this means that knowledge of a culture comes from an encounter between the researcher's situated perspective and the meanings carried by cultural practices. Argynbayev's writings are therefore read here as historically mediated interpretations of Kazakh social life, not as transparent descriptions. We apply these ideas to the written corpus only and make no claim about Argynbayev's state of mind or about the lived experience of the communities he documented. Our interest is in how historical situatedness shows itself in the way practices are represented in the text.

Bourdieu [9] adds something that hermeneutics tends to leave aside, because he questions the neutrality of interpretation itself. With the concepts of habitus and symbolic power, he argues that researchers occupy socially structured positions, and that these positions shape what they take to be objective knowledge. Ethnographic interpretation therefore needs reflexivity towards the researcher's own intellectual position as well as towards the culture under study. In this sense Bourdieu extends Gadamer: interpretation is shaped by

institutions, social structures and disciplines, as well as by tradition. A researcher inevitably approaches cultural material through his or her own views and assumptions, and ethnography becomes a hermeneutic way of reconstructing meaning. The same dynamic is visible in Argynbayev [13]. His accounts of Kazakh social institutions present rituals, customs and traditions as meaningful cultural realities, not as isolated empirical facts [1,14]. On Kazakh Genealogy, for example, treats genealogical traditions as symbolic representations that keep historical memory alive and define social identity [1,3,12,14]. Read in this way, ethnography becomes a means of uncovering the cultural logic behind the organisation of social relations [18,19], and the hermeneutic view makes clear that such knowledge is historically positioned [20,21]. Reflexivity adds a further requirement. Researchers need to examine how their intellectual background, institutional position and analytical assumptions affect their reading of cultural material [22,23].

2.3. Soviet Historical Context and the Formation of Ethnographic Knowledge

The history of ethnographic knowledge in Central Asia cannot be understood without the institutional and intellectual conditions of the Soviet period. Soviet ethnography was produced within a state-funded academic sector in which the study of peoples, customs, social organisation and nationality was tied to official categories of social and historical analysis. That wider academic environment shaped its objects, language and format [24,25]. These conditions are significant for Central Asian ethnographic writing because knowledge about Kazakh society was produced and categorised primarily within those institutions and frameworks. One key element was the Soviet concept of ethnos, which became influential in classifying human collectivities [26]. Soviet scholars usually examined peoples through ethnicity, nationality, culture, historical development and social organisation [27]. The theory of ethnos presented collective identity as historically formed and culturally transmitted, while placing each community within broader processes of social change. Ethnographic descriptions of the period were therefore shaped both by the traditions being documented and by the categories used to interpret them. Argynbayev's writing on family, genealogy, marriage, material culture and social institutions came out of an environment in which cultural continuity, collective identity and historical development were institutionally and theoretically important. Historical materialism belonged to the same environment. By linking social organisation to material conditions and to stages of historical development, it encouraged scholars to explain cultural practices through socioeconomic structures and not as timeless phenomena. Argynbayev's discussions of family organisation, economic practice, kinship and material culture can be read in this light, as representations tied to particular historical and social conditions. We do not assume that his work can be reduced to Soviet materialist theory. The Soviet context is treated as one of the conditions under which his knowledge was produced and circulated.

This context matters directly for IEKM. Historical consciousness in the model means more than adding background information. It asks the researcher to examine the horizons, institutions, categories and intellectual traditions that made a given piece of ethnographic knowledge possible. Gadamer's account of historically conditioned understanding lets us ask how the original text and our reading of it belong to different historical horizons. Reading Argynbayev therefore means attending both to the cultural–historical world his texts depict and to the Soviet scholarly conditions under which they were written. This keeps us from treating his descriptions as context-free accounts of Kazakh society. At the same time, the corpus is not explained away by its context. We interpret what the texts say while keeping in view the contexts that produced them. The Soviet setting supports, rather than replaces, the hermeneutic foundation of the study: Gadamer explains how understanding is historically situated, and the history of Soviet ethnography shows concretely how that

situatedness works in Argynbayev's case. In the case of a Central Asian corpus, this double attention makes it possible to identify both what is specific to the production of Soviet knowledge and the enduring interpretive value of the material recorded by Argynbayev.

2.4. Symbol, Narrative, and the Construction of Cultural Meaning

Theories of symbol and narrative also bring out the philosophical character of ethnography. Ricoeur [28] argued that symbols carry several layers of meaning and invite further reflection on the practices in which they appear, and that symbols and stories play a large part in how ethnographic knowledge is formed. Malinowski likewise insisted that cultural institutions be understood within the larger symbolic systems that organise social life [29,30]. Ricoeur differs from Gadamer in stressing the autonomy of the text. Gadamer describes understanding as an encounter between historical horizons; Ricoeur shows that a written text acquires meanings that go beyond its author's intentions and immediate circumstances. 'The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author' [28] (p. 30). Once written, a text becomes an object of interpretation in its own right and can produce new meanings in new contexts. He also writes that 'Explanation is the pathway to understanding' [28] (p. 74), meaning that interpretation has to pass through explanation on its way to a deeper reconstruction of meaning. This hermeneutic arc shapes our procedure. We approach Argynbayev's writings not merely as historical documents or private accounts of his observations but as texts whose meanings are still in development through contemporary readings.

Argynbayev's research into the symbolic side of culture engages with aspects of traditional Kazakh society. In Handicrafts of the Kazakh People, he regarded crafts as a cultural and economic activity, a manifestation of historical tradition and aesthetic value [12,31]. His research on family customs and rituals also demonstrates that symbolic actions encode a moral code and sustain cohesion [4,13]. We are not claiming that Argynbayev provides a philosophical system in which Western hermeneutics would play no part. But his handling of genealogy does more than demonstrate Geertz, for it complicates a strictly symbolic interpretation. For Argynbayev, genealogical knowledge represents social relations, but it also preserves historical memory, establishes belonging and links people to previous generations [14]. And in the Central Asian context that we are examining here, symbolic meaning appears to be closely linked with historical continuity. A Geertzian reading of genealogy therefore needs to be supplemented by attention to the historical horizon through which its meanings are passed on and reworked. This brings Geertz into direct dialogue with Gadamer: genealogy is read for what it represents and also for how its meanings are sustained over time. Our aim is to refine the relationship between symbolic interpretation and historical situatedness, not to reject Geertz. Argynbayev's corpus supplies culturally situated material through which established concepts can be tested, refined and, where needed, reconsidered, and it shows how theories formed largely in Europe behave when applied to a historically distinct Central Asian corpus. Symbols, narratives and texts thus become analytical sources for reconstructing the meanings embedded in practice, and this is how we approach Argynbayev's accounts of Kazakh traditions, family structures and institutions.

2.5. Reflexivity and the Social Conditions of Knowledge

Reflexivity is a basic requirement in ethnography and the humanities, because knowledge is always produced under particular social, historical and institutional conditions. Scholars never approach cultural material from a neutral position; their concepts and prior knowledge colour what they see, and recognising this makes the work more rigorous and more transparent. Bourdieu's notion of habitus explains how social structure affects percep-

tion and scholarly inquiry [32,33]. He defines habitus as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' [9] (p. 72), dispositions that guide perception, interpretation and judgement without necessarily becoming conscious. His concept of symbolic power adds that what passes for objective knowledge depends on institutional and cultural structures that legitimate certain interpretations. As he puts it, the point of view creates the object [22]. Interpretation reflects the researcher's intellectual and institutional position, so ethnographic inquiry needs reflexivity directed at the researcher as well as at the culture being studied. This is what allows us to treat Argynbayev's corpus as knowledge produced under particular historical and social conditions. Ethnographers need to take such conditions into account when they assess the relation between empirical content and analytical models [34].

Reflexivity also has a cross-cultural side. Work on researcher positionality and interpretive anthropology shows that sensitivity to different cultural approaches strengthens interpretive research [35,36], since knowledge is formed in the interaction between people and cultures. Argynbayev's own work contains an implicit reflexivity. His studies of Kazakh traditions and institutions show an awareness of the cultural and historical situation that determines social meaning [4]. By setting family traditions, genealogies and economic practices in their historical perspective, he acknowledges that a culture can be known only through the structures of the society that lives it. Reflexivity, then, strengthens the epistemological basis of ethnography. Knowledge arises from a dialogue between researcher and subject matter [37], and practices make sense only within their social context. Researchers have to examine their assumptions, positionality, and methodological choices, because these shape how ethnographic knowledge is produced and read [10,22]. Far from weakening validity, reflexivity adds rigour by making the conditions of knowledge visible [23,35].

2.6. Philosophical Tension Between Gadamer and Bourdieu

The perspectives discussed above pull in two directions. One concerns the historical conditions that make understanding possible; the other concerns the social structures that shape how knowledge is produced. Bourdieu argues that hermeneutics often underestimates the effect of social position, institutional power and academic habitus on the interpreter. In his view, an interpretation is not philosophically adequate until researchers have examined their own place within structures of symbolic power. The tension is useful for reading Argynbayev. Gadamer helps explain how a tradition becomes understandable through dialogue between text and reader, while Bourdieu reminds us that today's readers come to these texts from intellectual positions that differ, historically and institutionally, from his. We treat the two as complementary: Gadamer accounts for how understanding is possible, and Bourdieu sets the conditions for evaluating it critically. This is also why IEKM cannot be reduced to either thinker. Together with Ricoeur's account of textual mediation and Geertz's symbolic analysis, they form a connected process instead of four parallel categories.

The process works in sequence. Empirical engagement supplies the cultural material. Ricoeurian textual interpretation looks at how that material is mediated by the structure and autonomy of the ethnographic text. Geertzian symbolic analysis reconstructs the meanings carried by the practices described. Gadamerian historical consciousness places those meanings within historically formed horizons. Bourdieusian reflexivity then examines the social, institutional and intellectual conditions that shape the interpretation. The process is also recursive, because reflexive evaluation can send the interpreter back to an earlier step: the first observation, the textual reading, the symbolic interpretation or the historical context. No single thinker covers the whole movement. Geertz is strongest on symbolic meaning, Gadamer on the historical conditions of understanding, Ricoeur on textual mediation and plural readings, and Bourdieu on the social conditions of knowledge. The specific

contribution of IEKM is to make the relationship among these operations explicit, and to show step by step how description turns into critically examined cultural knowledge.

2.7. Ethnography as Humanities Knowledge

Debate about the epistemological status of ethnography has long turned on whether it belongs with the natural sciences or with the humanities [2]. Hammersley and Atkinson [17,38] argue that ethnography seeks to understand socially situated meanings, not to formulate universal laws, so cultural practices call for contextual interpretation as well as description. Our theoretical framework comes mainly from Western philosophy, while Argynbayev's corpus provides a historically grounded Central Asian case in which those concepts can be tested in practice. Section 5 sets out how Gadamer's hermeneutics, Ricoeur's theory of the text, Geertz's symbolic analysis and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology are applied to his writings.

2.8. Philosophical Significance of Argynbayev's Ethnographic Legacy

Argynbayev's ethnographic works, then, carry real philosophical weight. We do not set him up as an alternative to Western theorists. His writings are a historically situated corpus in which established interpretive concepts can be examined in a Central Asian setting: Western hermeneutic theory supplies the framework, and Argynbayev's texts are the material through which that framework is tested and, where necessary, adjusted. Examining them from this perspective reveals the deeper questions these books raise regarding cultural meaning, historical continuity and social identity [39], despite their central focus on the empirical study of Kazakh traditions and institutions. His research on family traditions, genealogy and economic practice shows cultural institutions working as symbolic systems that organise social life. Studying his work also widens the geographical range of philosophical writing on ethnography, which has concentrated on Western anthropological traditions; Central Asian ethnography brings perspectives rooted in other cultural contexts. Argynbayev's corpus can therefore be read both as a methodological contribution and as a philosophically significant source on interpretation, meaning and knowledge in a specific historical setting [40,41]. Previous literature has given little room to non-Western epistemologies, and the philosophical implications of Central Asian ethnography have rarely been discussed. This study addresses that gap. The philosophers we draw on are not cited for decoration. Gadamer gives an account of historically situated understanding, Ricoeur of the autonomy and openness of texts, Geertz [10] (p. 5) of how symbolic systems turn observation into cultural meaning, and Bourdieu of the social conditions of knowledge. With their help, ethnography appears as an interpretive process in which cultural meanings are produced, negotiated and reconstructed.

In the analysis that follows, these four perspectives serve as working analytical categories. Gadamer guides the reading of historical understanding, Ricoeur the reading of the text, Geertz [10] (p. 5) the symbolic analysis, and Bourdieu the reflexive evaluation of Argynbayev's writings.

2.9. Philosophical Dialogue with Primary Sources

We use these traditions as interlocutors in a dialogue with Argynbayev's texts, not as separate explanatory systems. Gadamer sets out the historical conditions of understanding, Ricoeur adds the autonomy of the text and the plurality of its readings, Geertz shows how symbols turn observation into meaning, and Bourdieu examines the social conditions of interpretation. The conclusions we draw from this dialogue are bounded by the case. They are philosophical interpretations of one corpus that may serve as a starting point for

comparative work on ethnographic knowledge. The originality claim of the article is not how novel the four traditions are, but how well we connect them in one framework, IEKM.

3. Results

The analysis of Argynbayev's corpus lends textual support to IEKM. Ethnographic knowledge in these works is not a simple accumulation of observations. It takes shape through a sequence, sometimes revisited, of empirical engagement, textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical consciousness and reflexive evaluation. Description is where ethnographic knowledge starts, not where it ends. Cultural material becomes meaningful as textual representation, symbolic meaning, historical context and reflexive scrutiny are brought to bear on it, and across the corpus, these dimensions work together, not as separate categories.

3.1. Ethnography as an Interpretive Form of Knowledge

Read closely, Argynbayev's writings present ethnography as a distinct kind of knowledge and not only a descriptive exercise. The practices he records carry symbolic meanings that organise social life and collective identity, and the ethnographer interprets them as well as documenting them. Some of his descriptions are ambiguous, and different historical or social vantage points yield different, equally defensible readings. Family and social practices in his texts encode culturally mediated meanings, which raises the question of how knowledge is produced in particular historical settings. In his writings, practices become ethnographic knowledge through description, textual selection and interpretation; we study that textual representation and make no claim to reach the lived experience of the communities themselves. Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People [4] is a good example. Marriage traditions appear there as expressions of cultural standards and moral duties as well as institutional arrangements, and kinship systems, marriage ceremonies and family organisation show how traditions pass on and maintain cultural values. Cultural phenomena acquire meaning only within their symbolic and historical context. This reading fits Gadamer's emphasis on historically situated understanding, although in this corpus historical interpretation works together with textual and symbolic analysis. We apply Gadamer's concepts to the corpus and do not claim to revise his position. Gadamer explains how understanding grows through historically situated dialogue, and our material suggests that ethnographic knowledge also needs a move from observation towards symbolic conceptualisation. Historical consciousness is necessary, then, but not sufficient on its own. In Argynbayev's corpus, kinship appears as more than a social institution: it is a structure through which cultural memory is organised and handed on.

3.2. Epistemological Characteristics of Ethnographic Knowledge

Several epistemological features of ethnographic knowledge stand out in Argynbayev's corpus. Unlike the natural sciences, with their interest in general laws and causal explanation, ethnography tries to grasp cultural meaning in particular historical and social settings, and so it depends on contextual and reflexive analysis. Cultural facts are not neutral data, since their meaning is set within networks of social significance. A second point concerns symbolism. The material practices, kinship relations and economic customs Argynbayev describes are at once empirical phenomena and symbolic systems, and ethnographic knowledge develops through interpreting those systems, not through a direct match between facts and an objective reality. Geertz's symbolic interpretation is an essential tool here. Yet our analysis suggests that symbolic analysis alone does not explain how ethnographic knowledge gains philosophical legitimacy; symbols become epistemologically significant when they are read within historically situated and reflexively examined frameworks. Arg-

ynbayev's economic material is a case in point. In his accounts, exchange also works as symbolic communication, so economic behaviour helps to produce cultural meaning and is not only an economic matter (See Table 1).

Table 1. IEKM Analytical Sequence Applied to Argynbayev's Corpus.

Analytical Stage	Philosophical Lens	Main Analytical Question
Empirical Engagement	Ethnographic textual evidence	What cultural practice or phenomenon is described?
Textual Mediation	Ricoeur	How is the cultural material represented and mediated by the text?
Symbolic Interpretation	Geertz	What meanings and symbols are embedded in the practice?
Historical Consciousness	Gadamer	Within what historical horizon should these meanings be understood?
Reflexive Evaluation	Bourdieu	How do positional, institutional, and theoretical conditions shape the interpretation?
Integrative and Recursive Synthesis	IEKM	Does the integrated interpretation remain supported by the text and context?

3.3. Family Traditions as Cultural Meaning Systems

One central finding concerns the role of family traditions in shaping cultural identity and social organisation. Argynbayev presents the family as one of the main channels through which culture passes from generation to generation. In Kazakh Family (Argynbayev, 1996) [13], the family is defined as the institution that keeps traditions, moral standards and social values active. Marriage rituals, family and household relations are types of social organisation as well as symbolic practices representing the moral values of Kazakh society. Traditional marriage rites marked the continuity of ancestry and drew individuals into larger systems of kinship and community, reinforcing group identity and mutual responsibility within the family. In this sense, ethnographic study can reveal the symbolic processes that operate in everyday social life. Family traditions are social knowledge systems: in this case, structures that transport cultural meaning across generations and highlight the interpretive nature of social knowledge. The results also show that historical consciousness is a precondition of ethnographic interpretation rather than mere background. Traditions are not static entities or impartial registries of the past. Ethnographic knowledge is historically dynamic: new meanings emerge as texts, researchers and intellectual contexts meet. Here Ricoeur's concept of textual autonomy becomes more significant. As ethnographic texts become self-sufficient objects of interpretation, their meaning continues to change as new readers and contexts encounter them, and interpretation remains open-ended rather than culminating in a final reconstruction of what the author meant.

3.4. Genealogy and the Symbolic Organisation of Society

A second major theme is the role of genealogical tradition in structuring social relations and historical memory. Genealogical narratives, as cultural processes contributing to a sense of belonging and continuity, emerge in On Kazakh Genealogy [14]. Genealogy matters in Kazakh society because it determines the way in which people relate to other individuals, clans and lineages. In the selected texts, these narratives can be read as more than literal records of descent: they are cultural accounts through which relationships, collective memory, belonging and continuity are represented and organised. From an ethnographic point of view, genealogies are shared discourses that carry common memory

and strengthen social identity, helping people recognise their heritage and their links to earlier generations. In this way, genealogical narratives reshape social understanding by creating continuity and collective identity, which shows the symbolic and epistemological side of cultural knowledge. Bourdieu's reflexive sociology complicates the picture, because researchers themselves occupy socially conditioned positions. We therefore argue that philosophical hermeneutics is methodologically stronger when it is joined to reflexive awareness of the institutional and disciplinary settings of interpretation. Material culture, too, can be read as an interpretive archive through which historical experience becomes symbolically accessible.

3.5. Cultural Meaning in Economic and Material Practices

Argynbayev's work on economic and material practices points in the same direction. In the Ethnographic Essay on Kazakh Livestock Farming [3], livestock breeding is presented as an economic practice and as the core of traditional Kazakh life, bound up with seasonal migration, adaptation to the environment and social cooperation. Knowledge of animal husbandry preserves experience and culture accumulated over generations. In Handicrafts of the Kazakh People [31], traditional crafts embody aesthetic values, social roles and historical traditions, and craft production is a form of cultural creativity through which communities keep their artistic heritage alive. Economic and material practices are functional, but they also form symbolic systems that encode social and environmental understanding. Ethnography can therefore find cultural meaning in daily economic activity and material culture as well as in ritual.

3.6. Direct Textual Analysis of Argynbayev's Works

This section shows IEKM at work on primary evidence. We analyse two representative passages from the works selected for close reading (Table 1): Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People [4] and On Kazakh Genealogy [14]. Both passages are our translations from the original-language editions. Each is taken through the same sequence as in the methodological procedure (Section 3.3 and Table 4): (1) empirical content; (2) textual mediation (Ricoeur); (3) symbolic interpretation (Geertz); (4) historical consciousness (Gadamer); (5) reflexive evaluation (Bourdieu); and (6) integrated IEKM interpretation. At every step we point to the particular words, concepts and descriptive features on which the reading depends.

Passage 1: Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People (1973)

'Marriage and family relations were closely connected with kinship, customary obligations, and the organisation of social life among the Kazakh people' [4] (p. 53; authors' translation).

Step 1—Empirical content. On the surface, the passage names three elements of Kazakh social life: 'marriage and family relations', 'kinship' and 'customary obligations'. It also links them, stating that marriage and the family were 'closely connected' with kinship and with 'the organisation of social life'. What is being described, therefore, is not an isolated domestic arrangement but marriage as a component of the larger social order.

Step 2—Textual mediation (Ricoeur). This is a generalising statement, not a report of a particular wedding. The collective phrase 'the Kazakh people' and the summary verb phrase 'were closely connected' conflate various specific practices into a single ethnographic object. In the terminology of Ricoeur [28], this is the point at which a practice is inscribed and the utterance is fixed as written discourse, so that it gains some distance from the context in which it was observed. Particular attention should be paid to 'the organisation of social life'. It is an analytical category of the ethnographer, not a phrase the participants themselves would have used, which means the text had already run the material through a conceptual vocabulary before any philosophical reading began.

Step 3—Symbolic interpretation (Geertz).

The words 'customary obligations' carry most of the weight of a symbolic reading. An obligation cannot be observed directly; it is a culturally recognised meaning that lets people see an action as duty, reciprocity or respect. Read with Geertz [10], the passage suggests that marriage served as a public sign of relations between kin groups and was more than a contract between two people. Pairing 'marriage' with 'kinship' implies that a marriage takes its meaning from the network of relations it creates or confirms.

Step 4—Historical consciousness (Gadamer). The past tense ('were') sets the practices in a horizon different from the time of writing. Two horizons are therefore in play: that of the Kazakh practices described, and that of Soviet ethnography in the early 1970s, when the description was written. The vocabulary fits the scholarly conventions of the period. Soviet ethnographers routinely classified family and marriage as institutions of social organisation and related them to stages of historical development, and the theory of ethnos treated such customs as markers of a historically formed people [25,26]. Phrases such as 'the organisation of social life' and 'the Kazakh people' may therefore echo these institutional categories and the influence of historical materialism on how social practices were classified [24,27]. Recognising this context does not reduce the excerpt to Soviet ideology. It shows that the meaning of 'customary obligations' is shaped twice: by the tradition being described and by the academic framework used to describe it.

Step 5—Reflexive evaluation (Bourdieu). Other readings are possible and need to be stated. A functionalist reading, close to the Soviet emphasis on social organisation, would take this passage as evidence that marriage existed primarily to reproduce kinship structures and economic cooperation, without any particular symbolic meaning. From a historical–materialist perspective, 'customary obligations' were remnants of a pre-socialist system. The symbolic reading in Step 3 is one of these, but not the only one. We favour this reading because the word 'obligations' points to acknowledged norms more than to economic function, but that preference itself reveals something about us. We read Argynbayev through the lens of post-Soviet academia, where much of his writing is valued as national cultural heritage, and this may tempt us to see cultural continuity where others would see Soviet classification. Bourdieu's [9] concept of habitus names this risk: the dispositions of both the present-day reader and the original ethnographer shape what looks meaningful in the text.

Step 6—Integrated IEKM interpretation. Taken together, the steps suggest that the passage represents marriage, from a particular historical standpoint, as a system of kinship-based obligations. The content it refers to (i.e., marriage, kinship, obligations) comes to us through a generalising ethnographic vocabulary; the symbolic meaning revolves around obligation; the historical meaning depends on how the described tradition relates to the institutional framework of the Soviet 1970s; and reflexive evaluation finds the symbolic reading plausible but not exhaustive. The reflexive step also sent us back to Step 2, where we came to treat 'the organisation of social life' as the ethnographer's category and not as a description of the practice. In this sense, the sequence refines the interpretation instead of simply adding layers to it.

Passage 2: On Kazakh Genealogy (1999)

'Genealogical knowledge connects generations by preserving knowledge of ancestry and relationships among related groups' [14] (p. 23; authors' translation).

Step 1—Empirical content. The passage names a kind of knowledge ('genealogical knowledge'), two things it does (it 'connects generations' and preserves 'knowledge of ancestry') and its social reach ('relationships among related groups'). Empirically, it refers to remembering and passing on lines of descent, which Kazakh tradition associates with genealogical narratives (shezhire).

Step 2—Textual mediation (Ricoeur). The sentence states in general terms what genealogical knowledge does; it does not describe any particular act of recitation. Written this way, genealogy appears as a living practice and not only as an institution of the past. In Ricoeur's terms, the written account opens the practice to readers who may themselves turn to the book as a source of genealogical knowledge, and the ethnographic text can in this way become part of the tradition it describes.

Step 3—Symbolic interpretation (Geertz). The verb 'connects' is the textual hook for a symbolic reading. Genealogy is more than a list of ancestors; it ties the living to earlier generations and individuals to 'related groups'. With Geertz, genealogical knowledge can be read as a symbolic system that places a person in a web of significance defined by descent, so that knowing one's ancestry signals belonging, legitimacy and social standing.

Step 4—Historical consciousness (Gadamer).

The word 'preserving' shows that genealogical meaning is both temporal and symbolic, because it relies on continuity with those who came before. Here Argynbayev's material complicates a purely Geertzian reading: the symbol acquires its meaning through historical transmission [5]. The horizon of the text is a significant aspect as well. Soviet scholarship often classified clan and lineage ties as archaic forms of social organisation [25], whereas the 1999 book was published after independence, when genealogical knowledge had acquired a new significance in public discussion. The emphasis on 'preserving' may hint at this post-independence horizon.

Step 5—Reflexive evaluation (Bourdieu). Genealogy can also be interpreted as an instrument of distinction. Ancestry can be used to legitimise difference in status between lineages, and thereby reproduce hierarchy, much as Bourdieu [9] describes symbolic capital. Another reading would interpret the passage as expressing an ideal of what genealogy should do, not a description of how it functioned. Our own position matters as well. For us, Kazakh genealogy is part of a living national discourse, and we might be inclined to emphasise what it connects over what it divides. The passage says nothing about hierarchy or conflict, and that silence may reflect what the ethnographer chose to record more than what happened in practice.

Step 6—Integrated IEKM interpretation. On the integrated reading, genealogy in Argynbayev's account is both a symbolic system of belonging and a vehicle of historical memory. The text presents it as living knowledge; the symbolic reading centres on 'connects'; the historical reading shows that this meaning depends on continuity with the past and on the post-independence moment of publication; and reflexive evaluation shows that the integrative side has been emphasised at the expense of possible hierarchical meanings. Reflexive evaluation therefore took us back to Step 3, where we qualified the symbolic reading: genealogy can signify distinction as well as belonging. The result supports the refinement proposed in Section 2.4, that in this corpus Geertz's symbolic interpretation has to be read together with Gadamer's historical consciousness. It does not suggest that Argynbayev's material disproves Geertz.

Comparison of the two passages. Running both passages through the same sequence shows what each step contributes. In neither case does the empirical content settle the meaning. Textual mediation brings out the ethnographer's analytical vocabulary; symbolic interpretation turns on particular words ('obligations', 'connects'); historical consciousness shows that the 1973 and 1999 texts were written under different institutional horizons; and reflexive evaluation surfaces alternative readings along with the assumptions of both the ethnographer and ourselves. The two analyses show IEKM working on primary texts, not just described in the abstract (See Table 2).

These examples show how empirical descriptions of cultural practice become philosophical interpretations through hermeneutic analysis.

Table 2. Ethnographic Evidence from Argynbayev's Works and Their Philosophical Interpretation.

Argynbayev's Work	Main Cultural Theme	Ethnographic Evidence	Philosophical Interpretation
Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People (1973)	Marriage and kinship	Marriage rituals, kinship relations, family organisation	Family functions as a symbolic institution transmitting cultural values.
Kazakh Family (1996)	Family traditions	Moral norms and intergenerational relationships	Family preserves collective memory and cultural identity.
On Kazakh Genealogy (1999)	Genealogy	Clan relationships and historical continuity	Genealogy constructs symbolic social identity and historical belonging.
Ethnographic Essay on Kazakh Livestock Farming (1969)	Livestock economy	Pastoral practices and environmental adaptation	Economic activities represent culturally embedded knowledge systems.
Handicrafts of the Kazakh People (1998)	Traditional crafts	Material culture and craftsmanship	Crafts symbolise historical continuity, aesthetics, and collective identity.

3.7. Epistemological Implications

The results have several implications for the epistemological standing of ethnography. First, ethnographic knowledge is interpretive: the symbolic meaning of a practice cannot be analysed without its cultural context. Second, ethnography is a kind of humanities knowledge that differs from the natural sciences, since it aims to understand cultural meaning within historical relations and not to produce general rules. Third, Argynbayev's writings give textual support to the argument that interpretation is central to the production of cultural knowledge. Ethnography thus appears as both a methodological and a philosophical field, in which cultural meaning is recreated through analysis and knowledge is historically and socially situated. This fits Geertz's [10] argument that culture is understood through symbolic interpretation and Ricoeur's [28] view that texts generate meanings beyond their original circumstances. A philosophical reading of Argynbayev's legacy therefore speaks to anthropology and to broader debates in epistemology and the philosophy of culture.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of Findings

Our findings support the view that ethnographic knowledge, at least as it appears in the selected Argynbayev corpus, is not a neutral accumulation of observations. Cultural meaning becomes intelligible through textual representation, symbolic interpretation, historical context and reflexive scrutiny. This conclusion concerns a written corpus. It is not direct evidence about lived experience, nor a universal claim about all ethnographic traditions. Within those limits, ethnography looks like an interpretive practice in which represented cultural experience becomes meaningful knowledge. Cultural facts do not carry meanings independent of their historical, symbolic and social settings; meaning comes from an ongoing process of interpretation in which observations are mediated by symbols, historical consciousness and reflexive understanding. Argynbayev provides descriptions of family institutions, kinship, genealogy, marriage and economic practice that go beyond documentation. They reconstruct the internal coherence of these institutions by showing them as functioning systems of interconnected values, memory and identity. Family appears not only as a biological or legal bond but as a symbolic institution through which moral obligations pass between generations, and genealogies act as stores of collective historical consciousness that also legitimise the social order.

This reading sits close to philosophical hermeneutics. For Gadamer, understanding can never emerge from a detached perspective, but arises within historically situated horizons: 'Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves' [5] (p. 305). The reader engages in a dialogue with meanings from the past in the act of interpretation, which also clarifies why Argynbayev's texts remain philosophically relevant long after the context of their writing has changed. In our material, the realities he depicted can be understood by moving back and forth between historical context and a modern reader's perspective. Ethnographic knowledge, then, is a historically mediated reconstruction of meaning rather than a direct reflection of reality, and historical consciousness is one of its conditions, not merely its background. Geertz's [10] view of ethnography as the reading of symbolic systems also fits the corpus. Marriage ceremonies, household practices, kinship obligations and economic activities appear as expressions of shared meanings, and their significance lies in the cultural logic that organises them, which is what Geertz means by thick description. However, symbolic interpretation does not tell the whole story. Ricoeur's notion of textual autonomy reminds us that texts mean more than their authors intended. Argynbayev chronicled specific historical realities, but the deep philosophical meaning of his texts continues to evolve as new readers apply contemporary issues to their contents. Readers today do not simply recover his intended meanings; they build new understandings in dialogue with the text and its context, and the texts themselves remain open to further reconstruction.

Hermeneutics explains how understanding is possible. Bourdieu adds that interpretation is shaped by social position, disciplinary tradition and institutional structure, and our study bears this out. Making these conditions explicit does not weaken ethnographic inquiry. It strengthens it, because rigorous ethnographic knowledge depends on interpretation and on reflexive self-awareness at once. The main theoretical contribution of the study is IEKM as an integrative framework. We do not claim novelty for the concepts of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz or Bourdieu taken one by one. What the model does is bring them into an explicit, recursive relationship for the reading of a bounded corpus. Each perspective on its own explains only part of ethnographic inquiry; taken together, they show knowledge emerging from the interplay of empirical engagement, textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical consciousness and reflexive evaluation. The findings also suggest that ethnographic validity follows different standards from those of the natural sciences. Scientific knowledge is judged by prediction, replication and causal explanation; ethnographic knowledge by interpretive coherence, fidelity to context and depth of explanation [41]. Its purpose is to reconstruct the cultural logic through which communities organise meaning, identity and continuity, something that purely positivist approaches cannot capture.

These points connect with the philosophy of science. Kuhn [42] argued that observation is never theory-neutral, since researchers read evidence through historically conditioned paradigms. Argynbayev's descriptions are likewise historically situated interpretations shaped by conceptual frameworks, cultural experience and intellectual tradition. Ethnography thus offers a clear instance of the broader argument that fully value-free observation cannot be achieved, and admitting this makes ethnographic inquiry more credible, not less. Positivist traditions have often separated observation from interpretation; in culturally situated research, our analysis suggests, the separation does not hold. In a spirit close to Kuhn's paradigm-dependent observation [42] and Feyerabend's rejection of methodological absolutism [43], IEKM treats understanding as the product of empirical engagement, textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical consciousness and reflexive evaluation working together. Ethnographic knowledge is an interpretive achievement, not a passive reflection of reality. In answer to research questions, ethnography can be understood as

a distinctive form of philosophical inquiry through which ethnographic descriptions of cultural experience become conceptually intelligible [44]. The study does not offer a new philosophical paradigm. It proposes a coherent synthesis that clarifies the conditions under which ethnographic understanding becomes possible, and in doing so it contributes to the interpretation of Kazakh ethnography as well as to debates in hermeneutics, interpretive anthropology and the philosophy of culture.

Although the analysis rests on Argynbayev's corpus and on Kazakh traditions, the questions it raises are not confined to one region. Ethnographers working in Indigenous, African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American settings face similar questions about interpreting cultural meaning, historical memory, symbolic practice and their own reflexivity. The framework proposed here may therefore help to guide comparative studies of ethnographic knowledge, provided the specificity of each tradition is respected. Kazakh ethnography is not presented as an exception. It is an example of how historically grounded material can feed into wider philosophical debate about interpretation, meaning and knowledge, and we hope it encourages more exchange between regional scholarship and international work in hermeneutics, interpretive anthropology and cultural epistemology.

The study responds to a gap in the literature. Ethnographic research has mostly been examined from methodological, anthropological or historical angles, and much less has been said about the epistemological basis on which ethnographic knowledge rests. Earlier work has tended to stress either symbolic interpretation or historical understanding. By drawing hermeneutics, interpretive anthropology and reflexive sociology together, we have argued that ethnographic knowledge arises from the interplay of all five IEKM dimensions, none of which explains cultural understanding by itself. This is in line with Gadamer's [5] view that understanding is historically conditioned and with Ricoeur's [28] claim that interpretation goes beyond the author's intentions. Our conclusion is that ethnography should be regarded as a distinctive epistemological tradition within the humanities as well as a qualitative research method, one concerned above all with the reconstruction of meaning. The model developed through Argynbayev's corpus is offered as a basis for future comparative research.

4.2. Original Philosophical Thesis and Theoretical Contribution

The originality of the study lies in assembling these four traditions into one framework designed to explain how ethnographic knowledge is constituted, not in offering new readings of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz or Bourdieu. According to IEKM, ethnographic understanding cannot be reduced to empirical observation or to textual interpretation alone. The findings are consistent with Geertz's [10] view that ethnography interprets systems of meaning, but they also show that knowledge emerges through a sequence of operations. Empirical engagement provides the material; Ricoeurian textual mediation turns it into an interpretable textual object; Geertzian analysis reconstructs its symbolic meanings; Gadamerian historical consciousness places those meanings within historical horizons; and Bourdieusian reflexivity evaluates the positional and intellectual conditions of the interpretation. The value of the model is in what happens in between. Description becomes textual interpretation, then symbolic understanding, then historically situated knowledge, and finally a reflexively examined reading. The recursion stems from the fact that an earlier reading can be reopened in the last stage. IEKM makes this transformation explicit and operable in the analysis of ethnographic texts, which is where it fundamentally differs from earlier work that separated the four traditions.

4.3. Western Hermeneutics, Kazakh Epistemology, and the Question of Epistemic Orientalism

One must be careful when applying Western hermeneutic concepts to a Kazakh corpus. We do not presume that Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz or Bourdieu exhaust what this material can mean. The ideas provide the analytical tools to consider some of the representations in Argynbayev's writings, while cultural meanings from the corpus remain central. The aim is not to translate Kazakh ethnographic knowledge wholesale into Western categories, but rather to explore where those concepts illuminate what we find there and where the corpus's cultural and historical specificity sets limits on them. Postcolonial critics have described the opposite approach as epistemic orientalism, in which indigenous traditions become intelligible only after being translated into Western theory. We have tried to avoid that. Philosophical concepts are used here as tools for dialogue with Argynbayev's writings, not as a universal interpretive authority that replaces their own foundations. Kazakh ethnographic traditions have their own historical categories of cultural memory, communal identity, oral transmission and symbolic practice, which cannot be reduced to European philosophical assumptions. Hermeneutics, on this view, is a bridge and not a hierarchy. IEKM is accordingly not an attempt to universalise Western concepts. It is a dialogical framework in which indigenous ethnographic knowledge keeps its intellectual autonomy while taking part in wider debates about interpretation, culture and knowledge. In this sense the study suggests that cross-cultural philosophical interpretation is possible without subordinating non-Western knowledge to Western theoretical authority.

5. Materials and Methods

The study uses the Interpretive Ethnographic Knowledge Model (IEKM) as its main analytical framework for reading Argynbayev's written corpus. The model draws on four perspectives: Gadamer's hermeneutics, Ricoeur's theory of textual interpretation, Geertz's symbolic anthropology and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. We treat them as connected analytical resources, not as new theoretical constructs, and our methodological interest lies in how textual representation, symbolic meaning, historical situatedness and reflexive evaluation interact. Because we work with written texts and not with field observation, we make no claim about the lived experience of the communities Argynbayev documented. We study how practices and meanings are represented in his texts and how those representations can be interpreted philosophically. The design is therefore a philosophical–hermeneutic case study, not a positivist or statistical one. In this study IEKM has five interdependent dimensions: empirical engagement, textual mediation (Ricoeur), symbolic interpretation (Geertz), historical consciousness (Gadamer) and reflexive evaluation (Bourdieu). They are applied in this order through the six-step procedure in Section 3.3, and the same order is followed in the textual analysis in Section 3.6.

5.1. Analytical Framework

The framework combines epistemological and hermeneutic perspectives and draws directly on the work of Geertz, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Bourdieu discussed above. We designed the procedure to be transparent. Hermeneutics was not treated as an intuitive way of reading: each stage of interpretation followed a set sequence and was documented, and every conclusion came from repeated reading of the primary texts, checked against the philosophical framework. Most hermeneutic studies rely on a single philosopher. Our procedure instead puts IEKM into practice and reads each description through five connected dimensions: empirical engagement, textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical consciousness and reflexive evaluation. These are not five new concepts. What is new is the way the model relates textual, symbolic, historical and reflexive operations in a recursive reading.

The order of the dimensions matters. The procedure starts with empirical engagement, identifying a practice, narrative or material description in Argynbayev's text. Next we ask, with Ricoeur, how the writing mediates and organises that material and how it may open it to several meanings. Geertzian analysis then looks for the cultural meanings and symbolic structures attached to the practice. Gadamerian historical consciousness places these meanings within the horizons of the people described, of the ethnographic text and of the present interpreter. Finally, Bourdieusian reflexive evaluation considers how the social, intellectual and positional conditions of both the original account and our reading may shape the result. The sequence is not strictly linear. The reflexive stage can send us back to an earlier textual or symbolic reading to reconsider an assumption in the light of historical or positional factors, and earlier interpretations are revised where needed. The strategy follows Gadamer's [5] view of historically situated interpretation, Ricoeur's [28] hermeneutic arc linking explanation and understanding, and Geertz's [10] thick description, all of which justify reading ethnographic texts beyond their descriptive content.

In short, the framework of this study combines philosophical hermeneutics, interpretive anthropology and reflexive epistemology.

5.2. Research Materials: Works of Khalel Argynbayev

The investigation is a philosophical–hermeneutic case study and does not propose a universal theory of ethnographic knowledge. Several corpora could serve this purpose; we chose Argynbayev's because it is among the most extensive records of Kazakh cultural life and provides rich symbolic material for philosophical interpretation. The results may transfer conceptually to broader philosophical discussions, but they are not statistically generalisable. The works were selected through purposive theoretical sampling, since together they represent the main areas of Kazakh cultural life: family and kinship, genealogy, economy, material culture and custom. Three criteria guided the selection: relevance to the research questions, a sufficient amount of textual (and contextual) material for hermeneutic interpretation and relevance to the historical continuity of the practices described. Table 3 lists the corpus, the publication years and the two works chosen (*) for close reading.

Table 3. Definitive Primary Corpus of Khalel Argynbayev.

Work	Year	Main Theme	Philosophical Relevance
Family and Marriage of the Kazakh People *	1973	Kinship and social institutions	Cultural meaning and symbolic order
Kazakh Family	1996	Family traditions	Historical continuity
Handicrafts of the Kazakh People	1998	Material culture	Symbol and identity
On Kazakh Genealogy *	1999	Collective memory	Narrative construction
Ethnographic Essay on Kazakh Livestock Farming	1969	Pastoral economy	Economic practice and social organisation

Note: All five works form the general corpus discussed in Sections 3.1–3.5.

The study analyses the selected works of Khalel Argynbayev according to the following criteria:

- Thematic relevance to family, genealogy, economy, and crafts.
- Coverage of major domains of Kazakh cultural life.
- Rich symbolic and narrative descriptions.
- Philosophical potential for interpreting cultural meaning.

We read these texts as interpretive ethnographic constructions, not simply as historical records (See Table 4).

Table 4. Corpus Selection Criteria.

Criterion	Description	Justification
Cultural Coverage	Family, kinship, economy, customs	Represents major domains of Kazakh ethnography
Historical Breadth	Works from different periods	Allows historical interpretation
Philosophical Richness	Symbolic and interpretive content	Suitable for hermeneutic analysis
Documentary Quality	Authoritative ethnographic publications	Ensures analytical credibility

5.3. Research Design and Procedure

The analysis followed a fixed sequence designed to put IEKM into practice. We applied it in the same way to each selected work so that the route from ethnographic description to philosophical interpretation would be visible. The first five steps follow the order of the five IEKM dimensions, the sixth integrates the results, and Section 3.6 uses the same order.

Step 1—Empirical Engagement

We began by reading the selected works closely and repeatedly, noting concrete descriptions of practices, institutions, narratives and material objects. We paid particular attention to passages on family and marriage, genealogy, economic activity, crafts, ritual and collective memory. At this stage we stayed close to the text and simply established what was being described, before giving it any philosophical meaning.

Step 2—Textual Mediation

The second step used Ricoeur's theory of the text to ask how this material is represented and organised in the ethnographic writing. We looked at narrative structure, points of conceptual emphasis, textual distanciation, and the possibility that the written account carries meanings beyond the author's immediate descriptive purpose. The aim was to keep the practice itself apart from the textual form in which it reaches us.

Step 3—Symbolic Interpretation

The third step applied Geertz's thick description to the symbolic side of the practice. We asked what it signified in its cultural setting, how participants might have understood it, and how ordinary behaviour, objects, rituals or stories could form part of larger symbolic systems. The movement here is from describing behaviour to interpreting meaning.

Step 4—Historical Consciousness

In the fourth step, we used Gadamer's hermeneutics to place the emerging interpretation within historically formed horizons. We considered the historical circumstances of the practice, the institutional and cultural assumptions behind the ethnographic account, and the relation between the horizon of the text and our own. This step guards against treating cultural meanings as timeless.

Step 5—Reflexive Evaluation

The fifth step drew on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology to examine the conditions under which the knowledge was produced and is now being interpreted. We looked at intellectual, institutional, historical and positional factors that could affect both Argynbayev's representation and our reading of it. Alternative interpretations and hidden theoretical assumptions were weighed at this point, so that no reading was treated as neutral or final.

Step 6—Integrative and Recursive Synthesis

The last step brought the results together into an IEKM interpretation, examining how the same material gains epistemological significance through the interplay of textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical consciousness and reflexive evaluation. Whenever reflexive evaluation exposed an unsupported assumption, a historical ambiguity

or a competing reading, we went back to the passage and repeated the relevant step. The procedure is sequential in its main direction and recursive in the way it checks and refines results. An interpretation was kept only if it remained consistent with the textual evidence and with the framework as a whole.

This way of working reflects Bourdieu's (1977) [9] understanding of reflexivity: interpretation depends on the relation between researcher, text and wider cultural context.

5.4. Validity, Reflexivity, and Interpretive Consistency

Interpretations are justified through:

- Repeated reference to textual evidence
- Consistency of themes across different works
- Reflexive awareness of the researcher's historical and conceptual position (after Bourdieu)
- Alignment between interpretation and established hermeneutic theory

This ensures qualitative validity and interpretive reliability.

5.5. Role of Researcher Perspective

We regard our own perspective as part of the interpretive process. Instead of claiming a neutrality we do not have, we use reflexivity to check how prior assumptions affect our reading. We read Argynbayev's corpus as researchers working in a post-Soviet academic setting where his books are often valued as sources of national cultural heritage. That position could incline us to stress cultural continuity, so we examine it explicitly in the reflexive step of the textual analysis (Section 3.6).

5.6. Methodological Limitations

The study has several limitations. The first is linguistic. Some of the material was published in Kazakh and Russian, and translation can affect how particular concepts, cultural meanings and expressions are understood. Second, we relied partly on translated editions, which give access to the main arguments but may not fully preserve the authors' terminology and intended meanings. Third, some older ethnographic works, including early publications by Argynbayev, are not fully available in digital form and could be reached mainly through library catalogues and archival records. We checked bibliographic details against authoritative catalogues, but limited access to editions restricts electronic verification and close examination of some historical sources. Future studies could address these problems by involving several analysts, working from original-language sources wherever possible and using systematic triangulation. All quotations from Kazakh- and Russian-language sources are our own translations and are marked as such in the text (See Table 5).

Table 5. Methodological Limitations of the Study.

Limitation	Description	Strategy Used to Address the Limitation
Interpretation-Based Analysis	Findings depend on philosophical interpretation rather than statistical verification.	Interpretations were grounded in established hermeneutic theory and textual evidence.
Limited Documentary Sources	Analysis focuses only on selected works of Khalel Argynbayev.	Major publications covering family, genealogy, economy, and crafts were selected.
Historical Context	Cultural interpretations reflect historical conditions of the analysed texts.	Historical context was incorporated throughout the analysis.

Table 5. *Cont.*

Limitation	Description	Strategy Used to Address the Limitation
Researcher Reflexivity	Complete objectivity is not possible in interpretive research.	Reflexive awareness and theoretical transparency were maintained.
Generalisability	Findings are conceptually transferable rather than statistically generalisable.	Conclusions are presented as philosophical insights applicable to interpretive ethnography.

5.7. Expected Type of Findings

This method produces:

- Epistemological categories of ethnographic knowledge.
- Interpretive patterns in cultural description.
- Symbolic structures underlying social practices.

5.8. Trustworthiness and Analytical Credibility

Several procedures were used to make the analysis trustworthy. Credibility came from sustained engagement with the whole corpus and repeated rounds of interpretive reading. Dependability rests on the explicit, documented sequence of steps. Confirmability was strengthened by constantly checking interpretations against textual evidence, which helped to rule out unsupported theoretical claims. For transferability, we give enough contextual detail for readers to judge whether the findings apply to other ethnographic settings, while keeping in mind that this is a bounded case. Philosophical interpretation is always situated, and we acknowledge our role as interpreters throughout. We kept track of how our theoretical assumptions influenced our reading of the texts; in contemporary hermeneutics, this kind of reflexive awareness counts as a condition of rigorous interpretation, not as a weakness of method.

Because the study is limited to one corpus, its findings are conceptually transferable but not statistically generalisable. Comparative studies of other ethnographic traditions would be needed to test how far the model applies more widely (See Figure 1).

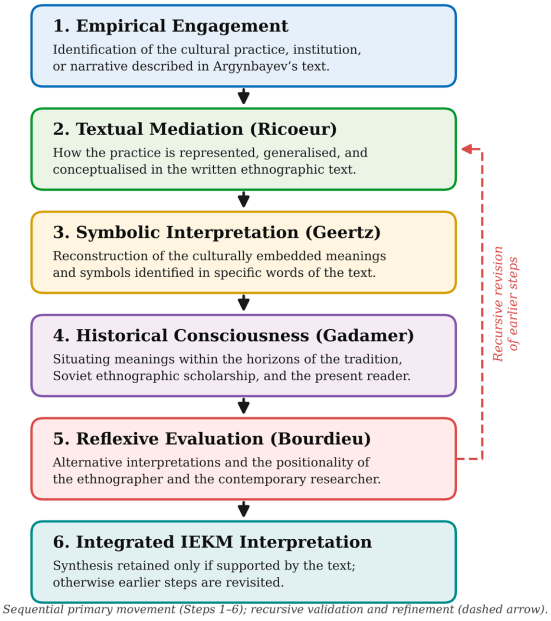


Figure 1. Interpretive Ethnographic Knowledge Model (IEKM): Five Interdependent Dimensions and Their Integrative, Recursive Synthesis.

6. Conclusions

This study has looked at ethnography as a form of knowledge production through a philosophical reading of Khalel Argynbayev's corpus. Ethnographic knowledge, on this reading, is neither a sum of observations nor a matter of subjective interpretation. Cultural understanding comes about as empirical material passes through textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical contextualisation and reflexive evaluation. The main theoretical contribution is the Interpretive Ethnographic Knowledge Model (IEKM). Its concepts are not new; they come from Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz and Bourdieu. What the model adds is a specification of how these perspectives can work together as a sequential and recursive process. Empirical engagement supplies the material, Ricoeurian textual mediation shows how it is constituted as a text, Geertzian analysis reconstructs its symbolic meanings, Gadamerian historical consciousness places them within historical horizons, and Bourdieusian reflexivity examines the conditions that shape the interpretation.

The value of the sequence lies in what happens between the stages. Description becomes textual material; textual reading opens the practice to symbolic analysis; symbolic meaning is set within historical horizons; and the result is examined reflexively. Since reflexive evaluation can send the researcher back to an earlier step, the process is recursive, and IEKM gives an explicit account of how its dimensions relate instead of simply listing four thinkers side by side.

Family practices, kinship, genealogy, economic activity and material culture in Argynbayev's works turn out to be more than descriptive ethnographic data. They gain epistemological significance when they are read for their symbolic meanings, historical contexts, textual mediation and conditions of production, and in this way ethnographic descriptions of cultural experience become conceptually intelligible knowledge.

Three conclusions follow, each bounded by the case. Ethnographic knowledge is interpretive, since practices acquire significance through the reconstruction of meaning. Ethnographic understanding is historically and culturally situated and cannot be separated from the contexts in which practices and texts are produced and later read. And reflexive evaluation is needed to assess the conditions and assumptions behind any ethnographic interpretation. These conclusions belong to a philosophical reading of one corpus; they are not empirical proof of a universal theory.

The study also shows that Western philosophy and Kazakh ethnographic knowledge can be brought into dialogue without making Western theory the authority over the material. Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz and Bourdieu serve as instruments for questioning Argynbayev's corpus, and the corpus in turn supplies the context in which their ideas are tested. Because the analysis is limited to one corpus, this should be taken as a possibility shown by the case, not as a general conclusion about cross-cultural interpretation.

Methodologically, the study offers a transparent procedure for the philosophical analysis of ethnographic texts. It moves from identifying empirical material through textual mediation, symbolic interpretation, historical contextualisation and reflexive evaluation to an integrative synthesis, returning to earlier steps where necessary. IEKM is therefore a working analytical path and not just a list of philosophical influences.

The scope of the study is deliberately narrow. Based on a single corpus, it cannot establish whether IEKM generalises to other cultural or ethnographic traditions, and translations and limited access to some editions may affect the reading of historical texts. Future research should test the model comparatively on other ethnographic corpora, ideally in the original languages and with several analysts or systematic triangulation, to see whether the sequential and recursive relations it describes hold up in other historical and cultural settings.

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Ethnography, in the end, sits where empirical engagement, interpretation, historical understanding and reflexive knowledge production meet. We do not claim to have established a universal epistemology of ethnography. Our aim has been to offer an integrated and explicit model for examining a bounded corpus philosophically, and a starting point for comparative work on how cultural experience is written down, interpreted symbolically, placed in history and turned, through reflection, into ethnographic knowledge.

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