

# THE TRADITIONAL OGLAK TARTIS AMONG THE KIRGHIZ OF THE PAMIRS

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In the course of research into one of the earliest known versions of the Central Asian dastan or ornate oral history, *Alpamysh*, this writer paid a visit in the summer of 1984 to the Kirghiz of the Pamirs. This group, now settled in the Eastern part of Asia Minor under the auspices of the Turkish government, fled from their home before the occupying Soviet in 1979. Since then, a number of papers on the Kirghiz have appeared, most of which have expressed concern over whether the members of this particular tribe would be able to retain their customs, traditions and ceremonies. Although the primary purpose of the trip was to compile a glossary of Kirghiz terms not found in any available dictionary, it became clear that it would also provide an unusual opportunity to observe other aspects of Kirghiz culture.

As a house guest of the tribal elder Rahman Kul Kutlu Khan,[1] the author was privileged to participate in two weddings held in the course of his stay. Beside the games, the obligatory "Slow Walk" of the groom was duly performed. Two of his close friends held the groom's arms high up and outstretched, and the trio crossed the village. In this way, taking one step approximately every three seconds, it took several minutes to cover the path from the groom's house to the bride's, a distance of several hundred yards. For three nights, the singing of the *Kirghiz ir* (melody)[2] could be heard for miles while the members of the tribe surrounded the bards in a circle listening to the recitation of dastans.[3]

The wedding ceremonies, in full native regalia, included the usual Central Asian feast reminiscent of the description found in *The Book of Dede Korkut* dastan, "Mountains of meat devoured." [4] Neither were the accompanying time honored games neglected. For the Kirghiz of Van, the *Ashik oyunu*[5] does not seem to require a special event for regular participation by young and old alike. Since *Ashik* can be played either by teams or individuals, it was a common sight to witness boys taking part alongside their elders.

However, *Oghlak Tartish*[6] is a game reserved for the able-bodied young men who must field formidably agile and hardy horses. Literally, the name means "Contest for the Goat," actually the carcass thereof. Usually a young goat is killed, then its abdominal organs are removed and replaced with wet sand to weigh it.[7]

The contest has very few rules and is deceptively simple. The starting point is a circle, the diameter of which is generally proportional to the number of participants, varying from ten to one hundred feet.

As soon as the *Aksakal*[8] judges give the starting signal, the goat is picked up by one of the players; the object is to bring it back to the starting point. This is easier said than done for each horseman plays for himself. The game has all the elements of mounted combat, although the only weapon allowed is nothing more dangerous than a whip, which may, however, have lead reinforced tips. The horseman in possession of the goat tries to outmaneuver all others in order to bring it back to the circle. The rest oppose him fiercely and reach for the goat, seeking a hold and tugging. Hence the *tartish*. [9] The new possessor attempts to ward off the pursuers by clutching the goat between his thigh and his saddle.

During the course of the game some unlikely, unforeseen and ad hoc alliances may be formed among the combatants. These alliances are usually short-lived, dissolving in the rapid fluidity of the competition as quickly as they are established. Thus brothers may be vying for the honor of becoming the new champion, while old rivals can be seen aiding each other. All this fosters fast-thinking teamwork in fighting the enemy that is absolutely vital under actual combat conditions, which the game very realistically simulates.

Historically, the contest of Oghlak Tartish was an occasion to assess the courage and skill of the new generation; as well as re-test the durability of the older one. It also served as a means by which the millennia-old horsemanship skills were transferred from the master to the novices. Lessons are learned and the need for breeding better and more durable horses is reinforced, since the game is also a showplace of equine beauty and excellence.

The Kirghiz of Van, however, who had migrated to the Turkish Republic only a year before, had not yet had enough time to build up their horse-herds. Therefore, in order to allow greater participation --and not to deprive the young men of the experience-- the Oghlak Tartish was played in a much simplified form, that is to say, on foot. This variant did not seem to dilute the seriousness of purpose or change the rules in any appreciable way. Upon observing this development, it was a natural step to question the Kirghiz elders on the historical versions of the game. It is known that, in order to make the contest even more trying, at times a young calf would be used, if one was available.[10] However, when Rahman Kul referred in passing to the game as Kok Boru, a more detailed investigation became necessary.

Kok Boru[11] was the wolf's head symbol adorning the standards of the early Turkish Khanates of Central Asia, and it also repeatedly appears in the Oghuz Khan dastan,[12] as well as its derivatives. It commands respect and fear simultaneously, appearing variously as a guide, ancestor and cherished symbol. But serving as a replacement for Oghlak? Rahman Kul's answer was straightforward: What better way to remind ourselves that one must learn from the masters? Kok Boru was the ruler of the Central Asian bozkir. He has survived since the beginning of time. He was always free and remained free, unburdened by any pettiness around him. He fought for his freedom when necessary. Therefore, our ancestors used a Kok Boru to play this game and affixed his name to it in remembrance.

One of the earliest printed versions of Alpamysh, the great Central Asian dastan, supports Rahman Kul in this respect. The contest is referred to as Kok Boru.[13] There seems no escape from the conclusion that in ancient times it was the body of the ancestral totem over which the contestants struggled. But at the same time, each contestant considered himself to be a Kok Boru.

#### NOTES:

1. See Nazif Shahrani, *The Kirghiz of Wakhi of Afghanistan* (Seattle, 1979).
2. Remy Dor has published extensively on this topic. For example, see his *Si tu me dis chante! chante!....: Documents pour servir a la connaissance et l'etude de la tradition orale des Kirghiz du Pamir Afghan* (Paris, 1981).
3. A. Hatto has been producing a series of studies on the Kirghiz epic since the late 1960s. Among his other works, see his *Memorial Feast for Kokotoy Khan* (Oxford, 1977).
4. Cf. the description in the story of "Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan:" "He heaped up meat in hillocks, he milked lakes of kumiss." See *The Book of Dede Korkut*, translated by G. L. Lewis (Penguin, 1974). Kumiss, being fermented mare's milk, was not yet available in the new Kirghiz home.

5. See H. Altay, "Kazak Turklerinde Asik Kemigi ve Asik Oyunlari" *Turk Dunyasi Arastirmalari Subat* 1984 for a full description of the game.
6. Among Persian and Tajik speaking populations of Central Asia, this game is also known as Bozkashi.
7. Some romantic traveller who have ventured into Central Asia also recorded the contest, perhaps not realizing its solemn purpose and traditions.
8. Aksakal: literally white beards, the respected elders of the tribe; while the Karasakal (blackbeards) are the mature middle generation who are above the bala (children) group. The latter includes the youngsters still in puberty.
9. In fact, in the heat of the game, the goat is often pulled apart. It is a normal occurrence to stop the contest momentarily to replace the totally obliterated goat.
10. Though this appears to be a development later in time.
11. "Sky Wolf," or Blue-White Wolf.
12. For example, see Z. V. Togan, *Oguz Destani* (Istanbul, 1972). This work contains a useful bibliography of various versions.
13. The version of *Alpamysh* to which I refer is currently being translated into English by the present writer.