

TWO ALTAIC GAMES: "CHELIK-CHOMAK" AND "JIRID OYUNU"

H.B. Paksoy

Chelik-Chomak among the Kazakhs and elsewhere[1]

The game derives its name from the Turkish words: Chelik (rod); and Chomak (stick, or, bat). It is popular among children and adolescents, particularly the males. The contest requires more skill than raw power and calls for motor coordination and helps develop it further.

The game of Chelik-Chomak can be played between two individuals or teams. The batting side drills a cavity in the ground, usually no more than 15cm. in diameter and five to ten cm. in depth. Alternatively, this aperture in the soil can take the shape of a miniature slit-trench with similar dimensions. This will be the "home" for scoring purposes. The Chelik is placed on the opening so that its ends remain on the surface of terra firma. This prevents the Chelik from falling in, while leaving more than half of its underside exposed and accessible from above.

The dimensions of both the Chelik and the Chomak depend on the relative sizes of the participants in the game, the younger children opting for smaller variants than their elder brothers. However, the Chomak or bat rarely exceeds the height of a contestant. Usually, it is no longer than three quarters of the height of the player. In proportion, the Chelik is approximately one fifth to one seventh of the length of the bat, and entirely cylindrical. The diameters of the Chelik and Chomak tend to be equal to each other. Both are cut from hardwood trees, since they will have to withstand the force of sudden shocks.

The batsman will "serve," holding the Chomak with both hands, arms stretched out, the balance of the body maintained by standing legs apart. The other end of the Chomak will be inserted into the orifice, under the Chelik. With an upward thrust, the Chelik will be sent flying high and forward into the plains. The receiving party will attempt to catch the Chelik in flight, before it makes contact with ground. If the defender is successful, the sides will trade places, the original receiver becoming a batsman.

If the receiver cannot stop the Chelik while it is in the air and the Chelik hits the ground, the receiver has one option. He will try to hit the Chomak --now placed on the "home," where the Chelik was-- by throwing the Chelik at it. If the receiver is successful in accomplishing this task, the sides will change places.

However, if the receiving side fails to hit the Chomak with the Chelik, the batsman will begin the game. This time he will --from the "home" spot-- attempt to tip the Chelik up without the use of a slit or orifice in the ground. He will hold the Chomak firmly in his hand, face the Chelik and place the opposite end of the Chomak over the Chelik, making tight contact. Pulling the Chomak towards himself, he will roll the Chelik on the ground for a distance of few centimeters. In a sudden move in the opposing direction of the initial "roll", the Chomak is thrust under the Chelik lifting it from the ground.

The Chelik will rise just about the height of the batsman, or somewhat higher. Once the Chelik tipped into the air, the batsman will aim to strike it in the middle. The object of the batsman is to send the Chelik over the head of the defending side and as great a distance as possible. He will repeat the process three times, if successful in each turn. Then he will count his steps back to "home" to keep score and start, once again, batting.

If the Chelik --batted by the batsman-- is caught in flight by the defending party, or the batsman fails to get the Chelik airborne three times in a row, this will constitute an "over" (or,

"inning"). The sides will change places and go back to the orifice and "serve" to determine whether the party "serving" will get to bat, by means of the process described earlier.

The score is kept by measuring the distance between "home" and the spot where the Chelik was caught, or the place from which the batsman failed to get it airborne. This is accomplished by counting the steps it takes to reach "home" from the point where the Chelik was caught, or the place from which the batsman failed to get it airborne. This is accomplished by counting the steps it takes to reach "home" from the point where the Chelik was either caught or "died." The game will come to an end when the first side reaches a predetermined sum, such as a count of 500 paces or points total. An almost identical game, under the designation "Tip- Cat," was apparently once popular in the British Isles between the 17th and 19th centuries:

A short piece of wood tapering at both ends used in the game, in which the wooden cat or tip-cat is struck or "tipped" at one end with a stick so as to spring up, and then knocked to a distance by the same player.

In fact, the game was so popular that:

In the nineteenth century there were repeated complaints that the pavements of London were made impassable by children's shuttlecock and tipcat.[2]

These references require further attention to the historical origins of the game. Where was it first played? Which way did it travel? Kashgarli Mahmud in DLT (c. 1070 AD) provides a clue:

Also in the game of tipcat striking one stick with another to make it fly... you say "taldi." [3]

Therefore, it appears that the game of Chelik-Chomak was known prior to Kashgarli Mahmud. It is still alive and well, not only in various locations in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan (where it is called Chillak)[4] but also in Asia Minor. In the latter setting, as in Kashgarli Mahmud's description, the act of "tripping up the Chelik," as described above, is known as chelmek, hence chelik (tripped- up).

Jirid Oyunu in Asia Minor and Elsewhere:

The rules of scoring of Jirid Oyunu are even simpler than those of Chelik-Chomak. The same cannot be said of the game's ultimate purpose and the concentration and skill the exercise demands. Skill required in each, however, are not unconnected.

Two rows of equal numbers of horsemen assemble in the open field. Each member in one row has a partner, a "team- mate" in the other. The cooperation of the partners is vital, for only one pair will win the game. The members of the First Row, upon the signal of the Aksakal judges, start to move away from the Second, at full gallop. After the lapse of a predetermined period, usually approximately ten seconds, the Second Row gives chase, again at full gallop.

The Second Row of horsemen are the ones who are carrying the Jirid, which is a short wooden lance of approximately 150 cm in length. The diameter is not critical and can be about 12 cm. (But the wood cannot be very dry, or else it will lack the necessary mass). With the signal of the leader, the Second Row collectively heave their individual Jirids simultaneously, toward the First Row, which is still galloping away from the Second Row. The task of the First Row, then, is to catch the Jirid in flight without stopping. When the First Row catches the wave of Jirid hurled at them, the entire row --upon the command by the leader-- rotates 180 degrees. Observing this turnabout, the Second Row turns too. Now the roles are reversed. Second Row will be galloping away and have to catch the Jirid hurled at them by the First Row. The pairs who do not "hit their marks," that is, the ones who dropped the Jirid, in effect failed to connect, are immediately eliminated from further participation in that bout. The remaining pairs continue until only one pair remains. They become the winners.[5]

Variants:

A variant of the Jirid Oyunu calls for both rows to line-up in parallel. They are required to gallop in the same direction, with a maintained side distance of anywhere from 50 to 100 paces. The object and other rules remain the same. It appears there are other variants as well. The Mamluk-period historian Ibn Taghribirdi described the lance exercises in 15th century Egypt. It is likely that the Jirid Oyunu was brought to Egypt (from Asia) by the Kipchak Turks. The furusiyye exercises were sometimes called funun al-Atrak, or, "Science of the Turks." [6]

The Lance Game, like most of the furusiyye exercises, was introduced on a large scale in the Mamluk sultanate by Sultan Baybars, when he built Maydan al-Kabak in 666/1267-8. The exact form of the game, however, is not discernible from Mamluk-period works:

...the Lance Game constituted a central feature of "mahmil" procession. But this fact is of little help in our attempt to reconstruct that game, for the sources dwell mainly on details pertaining to its external aspects and very largely ignore the essential ones. [7]

Kabak appearing in the name of the above referenced Maydan al-Kabak hippodrome may have been derived from the Turkish game of Altin Kabak (Golden Gourd). A. A. Divay (1855-1932), who collected the description of this game from the Kirghiz during late 19th century, wrote:

During great holidays in olden days, the Kirghiz organized a game called altyn-kabak, which means golden-gourd. A long pole was brought, they suspended at one end of the pole a gourd with gold or silver coins and put the pole in the ground. Then marksmen came out and shot (with arrows) at the gourd. Whoever split the gourd received the contents. They say that even now sometimes this game is played. [8]

Ayalon also provides a synopsis of Altin Kabak played on horseback. Given the details Ayalon culled from his sources, the "Lance Game" of the Mamluks exhibit certain differences from Jirid Oyunu:

Ibn Taghribirdi is of the opinion that the Lance exercises of the "mahmil" procession were originally (13th century? --HBP) quite different from those performed in his own days. [9]

States Ibn Taghribirdi:

The two rival teams of horsemen faced each other in two opposing rows. At the head of each row, on its right hand side, rode the respective master. The two masters were to first to advance from their sides and fight each other. Then came the deputies, then the first pupil of each group and so on to the last pupil in each opposing row. [10]

Contrasted with the above description of the Jirid Oyunu, where catching the Jirid in flight is essential to the game in full gallop, it appears that there may well be two separate branches of the "Lance Games." Since at the moment we do not know of the original format of the Lance Game hinted at by Ibn Taghribirdi, we may conclude that the Jirid Oyunu and the "Lance Exercise" of the Mamluk-period may have evolved along different paths from a single origin. The first mention of Jirid in English language sources occurs in the form of jared (and variants) and appear in the second half of the 17th century, in travellers' descriptions of "dart" or "javelin" throwing. Almost all observations seem to have been made in Asia or the Middle East. A later language reference (1775) to the Jirid Oyunu provides a comparison point in its description of the action of the game:

Players were galloping from all sides... throwing at each other the jarrit [sic] or blunted dart. [11]

Historically Jirid may also be equated with Jida [12] a close proximity weapon --a short lance, usually made of steel-- used exclusively by horsemen. Generally, a horseman carried three Jida in a special carrying case, strapped to the right side of the horse, in front of the saddle. When the horseman was pursued by a hostile horseman, he drew a Jida from its carrying case and heaved it backwards, to hit the pursuer in the chest. [13] Therefore, the origin of the Jirid Oyunu is perhaps related to the use of Jida. [14] This probability is further underscored by

another occurrence of Jida from the sources. Jida Noyon refers to a commander of a thousand, in the service of Chinggis-Khan (c. 1220), operating in the vicinity of Qaraqorum or Qaraqum. He is also known as Ulus-Idi.[15] Since the word Noyon is generally used as a title or rank,[16] perhaps Jida-Noyon is an extension, possibly related to the armament of his troops.[17]

Conclusion

In any case, it appears that the skill in catching the Chelik may be transferrable to catching the Jirid. Of course, the purpose of Jirid Oyunu is more than winning a game. Learning to judge the trajectory and behavior of a flying missile, in the form of a short lance, may be of vital import in battle. In fact, even during the game itself, it is not unusual for the players to suffer from wounds inflicted by the Jirid, despite the fact that the Jirid is usually specially blunted to prevent just that.

NOTES:

1. This may have been the first demonstrational paper in the history of the PIAC (Permanent International Altaistic Conference), as I conducted a session of Chelik-Chomak at the Mongolian Society picnic which was held in conjunction with 30th PIAC. Originally, I had planned a "trilogy" of games. The first of the three was published in JRAS (1985, Part 2) under the title "The Traditional Oghlak Tartish Among the Kirghiz of the Pamirs." A previous draft for the present two games was prepared for the 28th PIAC held in Venice. This version supercedes the Venice Draft. I acknowledge the financial assistance rendered by PIAC which enabled me to read this paper to its 30th meeting.

2. Ioana and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford, 1969), 10-11.

3. The paragraph immediately preceding this quotation reads:

ar topiqni adri bila taldi; translated as "the man struck the ball with a forked stick. This is a type of game of the Turks. When one player wishes to have the first play, he strikes in this way, the first play going to the one who is most skillful at it.

See Kashgarli Mahmud *Diwan Lugat at-Turk (Compendium of Turkic Dialects)*, Translated by Robert Dankoff with James Kelly (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), Part I, 399. See also Resat Genc, "Kasgarli Mahmud'a gore XI. Yuzyilda Turklerde Oyunlar ve Elenceler" *I. Uluslararası Turk Folklor Kongresi Bildirileriz 5 Vols. (Ankara, 1976) Vol IV, 231-42; Cf. Dankoff, 257.*

4. Dr. Bahtiyar Nazarov, at this writing the Director of the Institute of Language and Literature of the Ozbek USSR Academy of Sciences in Tashkent, indicated that in some portions of Ozbekistan, the game is also called Kopkari.

5. This description of Jirid Oyunu is based on my observations of the game on the central planes of Asia Minor during various visits. According to the participants, the game has been handed down from one generation to the next as far back as the collective memory reached. It is noteworthy that one Oghuz oymak from the Dulkadir federation named Jerid, in the 17th century, was living in the vicinity of central Asia Minor. See Faruk Sumer, *Oguzlar* (Istanbul, 1980). 3rd edition, 606-7.

Unfortunately, the article by Cemal Yener on this game, "Eski Turk Sporlarindan Cirit" in *Yesilay* 175 [?], Sayi 7/1947, 5-12 was unavailable to me. See *Basbakanlik Kultur Mustesarligi Milli Folklor Enstitusu Yayinlari 7, Turk Folklor ve Etnografya Bibliografyasi II* (Ankara, 1973), 76; item 962.

6. See D. Ayalon, "Notes on the "Furusiyya" Exercises and Games in the Mamluk Sultanate" *Scripta Hierosolymitana* Vol IX 1961, 31-63. (Originally published in Hebrew) reprinted in the same author's *The Mamluk Military Society*, Variorum Reprints (London, 1979), 36, Note 21.

7. Ayalon, 47.

8. See H. B. Paksoy, *Alpamysh: Central Asian Identity under Russian Rule* (Hartford: AACAR, 1989).

9. Ayalon, 48.

10. Ayalon, 52, note 112, citing Ibn Taghribirdi. Furthermore, Ayalon, 53, provides the following comment:

"Their constant occupation with lance and similar exercises handicapped the horsemen gravely inasmuch as they could not make use of their hands and legs simultaneously."

This is a surprising remark since the use of the legs is essential to good horsemanship, with or without lance.

11. OED, 1505.

12. "Jida -- A dart, a javelin to be thrown." See J. Redhouse, *A Turkish English Lexicon* (Constantinople, 1890); New Impression (Lebanon, 1974), 647. See also Jyda in W. Radloff, *Versuch Eines Wörterbuches der Turk-Dialecte* ('S- Gravenhage, 1960), Reprint, Vol. IV, 153.

13. Dr. Bugra Atsiz provided this information and observed that samples of Jida have survived and are on display in various museums in Asia and Europe, including Vienna.

14. I have not made a survey of the Ottoman sources which are likely to yield additional information on Jirid and Jida.

15. See W. Barthold, *Turkistan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1977), 416, note 1. "Ulus-Idi" might have been yet another title. To this, an addendum to n.1 of p. 416 by J. A Boyle (on P. IV) adds the following:

In Boyle's article, "on the titles given in Juvaini to certain Mongol Princes," 148-52, it is suggested that, like Tuluy's title Ulugh Noyan, that of Ulug Idi "Lord of the Ulus" (sc. the people comprising the leader's patrimony) was bestowed on Jochi after his death. Barthold's identification of Ulus Idi with the general Jedey Noyan must accordingly be corrected; we are here dealing with one person only, not two. See further, Juvayni-Boyle *History of the World Conqueror*, I, 86 n1.

16. Noyon/Noyan is "a prince, commander."

17. There is also a region named Jidali Baysun located in what is today Southern Uzbekistan. In this case Jida refers to a tree variety. The region is named after this tree, "...because of Jida tree's abundance." See Z. V. Togan, *Turkili Turkistan* (Istanbul, 1981), 308. According to Togan, this region (or, town) was later renamed Chaghatay. In current maps, there is no such designation. See H. B. Paksoy, *Alpamysh*, for A. A. Divay's comment on the location of Jidali Baysun.