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TRANSLATION OF THE KYRGYZ FAMOUS TRICKSTERS.

Кыргыздын атактуу куудулдарынын аңгемелеринин котормосу.

Перевод известных кыргызских юмористов.

Annotation: *This article is devoted to translation of Kyrgyz famous tricksters. Central Asian oral tradition illuminates many general processes of cultural production of the nations. Some stories of Kyrgyz folklore were published in Russian and Kyrgyz during the Soviet and post Soviet eras, they are clearly rooted within the established genre of Central Asian tradition.*

Аннотация: *Орто Азия элдеринин оозеки чыгармачышыгы кыргыз элдердин жалпы маданият процесстерин чагылдырат. Кыргыз фольклорунун кээ бир аңгемелери Советтер Союзунун учурунду жана андан кийин орусча жана кыргызча басылып чыгарышган. Алар оозеки чыгармачышыгынын жанрында жарык көргөн.*

Аннотация: *Центральноазиатское устное творчество освещает многие общие процессы культуры народов. Некоторые рассказы кыргызского фольклора были опубликованы на русском и кыргызском языках в советское и постсоветское время, они были созданы в жанре устного творчества народов Центральной Азии.*

Key words: *trickster, folklore, elaborate, generosity, myths, nickname, oral tradition. The term Tricksters was first used by Daniel G. Brinton in his Myths of the new World is a generic name of an imaginary figure appearing in the oral tradition of many cultures.*

Урунттуу сөздөр: *көз боёмоочу, фольклор, асылзаттык, кылдат иштелген, миф, өзүнүн чыныгы атынан башка коюлган ат, оозеки чыгармачылык*

Ключевые слова: *ловкач(обманичик), фольклор, благородство, тщательно разработанный миф, прозвище, устное творчество*

The term Tricksters was first used by Daniel G. Brinton in his *Myths of the new World* is a generic name of an imaginary figure appearing in the oral tradition of many cultures.

Trickster appears in many parts of the world in folk tales and in myths. Kuyruchuk is a Trickster of folk tales rather than a legendary, mythological ‘culture hero’, but he is a folk hero with a difference: he is a historical figure acting in changing circumstances and reacting to a new social environment. The Kuyruchuk of tsarist times behaves like Robin Hood, a man of the people. His efforts to reallocate wealth happen to coincide with the eve of the October Revolution.

In the Kyrgyz language, the name Kuyruchuk derives from the word *kuyruk*, which means ‘little tail’. It is interpreted as the one who follows. That is, Kuyruchuk’s wisdom, benediction, curse, or joke inevitably follows their addressee, like a tail follows the animal. Historical data prove that Kuyruchuk was a real person: Kudaibergen (i.e., God-Given) Omurzak Uulu is said to have been born in 1866, in Kyzyl-Tuu village, Jungal region, Naryn oblast and died in 1940 in his native village. He acquired the nickname Kuyruchuk meaning ‘Little Tail’ much later, when his special talents started manifesting themselves. Throughout his life, Kuyruchuk has been active in the southern Tian-Shan, up to Talas in the Northwest, Osh in the South, and in his later years in the Kyrgyz capital city Bishkek (then Frunze). However, historical evidence on Kuyruchuk preserved at the Institute of Kyrgyz language and Literature of the

Academy of Science of Kyrgyzstan is very fragmentary and is for the most part based on oral narratives. According to these records, Kuyruchuk was a child of simple descent. He went through elementary schooling and when he reached adolescence he became a shepherd and a horseman. Stories also tell of his extrasensory abilities manifested in his skill of “seeing through” and potential to predict and influence people’s fate.

The interest in Kuyruchuk was first prompted by the Soviet authorities in an attempt to make him an exemplary protector of the poor and fighter against the rich. Hence, a libretto for a ballet was written in the 1950-s which was performed, albeit with limited success. In 1964, a book of short stories with Kuyruchuk as their main hero was published in Russian. Although this publication not only gave the first corpus of the Kuyruchuk stories but also adjusted them to fit the

Soviet regime’s politics and propaganda, it is based on authentic folklore material. Viewed from today’s perspective, these Sovietized stories may in a certain sense be considered as an extension of popular Kuyruchuk stories. When conducting field research around the Issyk- Kul area, we recorded several tales that took their plot from those published in the book. Although, this research does not inquire into the Soviet impact on oral tradition, the Sovietized stories remain an important source of reference. In recent years, a collection of Kuyruchuk stories has been published anew in the Kyrgyz language. This collection attempted at de-Sovietization of the plot; however, this aim was only partially achieved: the episodes that openly glorified the Soviet regime disappeared, but the principles of social equality have been maintained. Importantly, this collection has been enlarged with stories and reminiscences related by Kuyruchuk’s son. There he tells of Kuyruchuk’s prayer (in Soviet stories Kuyruchuk is atheist) and his guardian angel.

The reality of Kuyruchuk’s personality significantly shapes the stories. However, one must not forget that our knowledge of the ‘historical’ Kuyruchuk is also based on his stories, which have a biographical slant.

Apparently Kuyruchuk came from a poor family, his father was a shepherd who herded his landlord Sultankhan’s sheep, his mother cleaned, cooked and washed for the rich man’s family.

His mother died of hunger, exhaustion and humiliation. We are not told what happened to his father, but, following the death of his mother, as a young child he had to take care of his younger brothers and sisters. He did this by begging, helping, or singing. One of his many talents was his ability to recite Kyrgyz oral poetry. According to his memoirs written in 1938 he started performing the “Manas”, the famous Kyrgyz epic poem when he was 19, which meant that he became a bard, akyn or a singer of tales. Although he was an excellent singer, he did not consider himself comparable to his great contemporary singers such as Toktogul, Genigok or Eshmambet; his unassuming utterance “I have poetry” was well-known. Nevertheless, he was an excellent akyn, and some of his public performances were memorable events. So it was no accident that in 1928 in Frunze several parts of the epic poem Manas were recorded following his recited version.

But he was more than a singer of tales. He was also a lover of jokes, an eloquent orator, a seer, and above all, a man of the people. This meant that he acted as a social critique, poking fun at the oppressors of the people, the rich semi-feudal landlords and merchants.

We know that he had got married, had children, and was an able horseman, a good fighter, and above all, a defender of the poor and the oppressed. A Kyrgyz Robin Hood, Kuyruchuk, lived much of his life in Tsarist times, and he was 51 in 1917, at the time of the October Revolution. If we are to believe his biography, by that time he was a well-known figure in his native Jungal region in northern Kyrgyzstan and beyond, and his opinion and actions carried weight. A supporter of Soviet socialist transformation, in Soviet times he continued to recite the epic poem “Manas” and to act as a social critique. He remained an independent and merry poor man throughout his life. Towards the end of his life he lived in the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR and worked in the Philharmonics, where he participated in the Kyrgyz national musicopoetic competitions; however, most of his life he spent travelling.

As a part of Soviet nationalities’ polices, in the 1960s Soviet folklorists identified and collected a sizeable body of Kuyruchuk stories and published them in Russian. Following Kyrgyzstan’s

declaration of independence in 1991 several new books have been published about him, this time in Kyrgyz. The Soviet and Kyrgyz publications overlap with each other, but there are important differences as well, the most obvious difference being that the pre-independence collection presented Kuyruchuk as an ardent supporter of Soviet ideology.

It is well-known that Soviet nationalities' policies recognized minority rights and promoted ethnic self-expression while simultaneously keeping them under control, which is aptly demonstrated by the Kuyruchuk stories. The stories in the Soviet publications must have been carefully edited and selected, and perhaps also in other ways manipulated, to provide ideological support to the early Soviet socialist policies. Religion only appeared in these stories as a backward force, as a remnant of the feudal heritage which Kuyruchuk mocks, or was mentioned marginally as part of Kyrgyz "folklore". Hence, the religious side of the hero Kuyruchuk became entirely suppressed. However, post-independence Kyrgyz language publications tell of Kuyruchuk as of good Muslim. What the Soviet and Kyrgyz representations have in common is that both present Kuyruchuk as a historical figure and the stories are set in the Kyrgyz landscape and are imbued with Kyrgyz traditions. Although the Soviet versions also present him as a committed supporter of Soviet political principles while the Kyrgyz publications emphasize his Kyrgyzness more, it seems that the post-independence selections are to a great extent based on the Soviet collections, and the difference is mostly in emphasis rather than in essence.

Considering all these publications together, the figure of a Kyrgyz folk hero emerges, who certainly deserves recognition in Kyrgyz and Central Asian oral tradition. It is our conviction that, although the Kuyruchuk stories have lost their innocence, so to speak, the moment they first appeared in print, they have nevertheless preserved a great deal of their authenticity. By this we do not mean that they have remained Kyrgyz through and through. Rather, the argument is that Kuyruchuk from the start has always been more than a Kyrgyz folk hero whose tales have been conveniently adjusted to the ideological needs of changing historical times. In Kuyruchuk we recognize the omnipresent figure of the Trickster, who we know from European, North and South American, African and South-Asian, Semitic, Chinese and Japanese tales and myths. Through discussing a representative selection of the Kuyruchuk stories in a wider, cross-cultural framework we shall show that in spite of these adjustments and manipulations Kuyruchuk has preserved most of the characteristics of the archetypal Trickster, and the translations of Kuyruchuk stories represent important additions to the oral traditions of the world.

In contrast, Kuyruchuk was a historical person, who lived under Russian rule most of his life and later in the Soviet Union. We also know his birthplace and some basic events from his life. A number of folk stories grew around him or, to turn this assumption the other way around, a number of almost heroic deeds were attributed to him, using the vehicle of oral tradition. Most of the stories available to us have been "sanitized" by Soviet folklorists, although some have emerged in post-Soviet Kyrgyz publications. In these the major addition is Kuyruchuk's religiosity, which obviously did not fit Soviet atheist ideology. It is very unlikely that the Kuyruchuk of the Sovietized stories was a pure folkloristic invention. Rather, we assume that he used to be a "natural" folk Trickster, who, in spite of manipulations in Soviet and post-socialist publications, has retained most of his typical Trickster-like features, thus proving his authenticity. By authenticity I mean that he was not fully the invention of Soviet ideologues: the raw material was given and it was simply shaped and adjusted to the needs of the new power holders: modern world also needs Tricksters.

Kuyruchuk's names deserve some attention. As mentioned above, his official name is a Central Asia Islamic name Kudaibergen meaning "God-Given", which is suggestive of connections to the divine. His nickname is Kuyruchuk, that is 'Little Tail'. Although the explanation for this nickname is connected to the consequences of his tricks, the stories follow him like a tail. But bearing in mind that many Tricksters all over the world appear in animal shape or are capable of changing their appearance, the nickname may acquire an additional significance. Moreover, the Kuyruchuk stories also provide support to this interpretation. For example, the story called *I am Kuyruchuk* is built on name symbolism and the animal motif. Kuyruchuk is confronted with a malicious rich man whose nickname is "Rat". He pretends to be a generous host to the tired and hungry visitors as custom dictates, but he abuses

his duty as a host and feeds his hosts nauseating food, which, however, obeying the unwritten laws of hospitality, the visitors are obliged to consume, then he laughs at their tortured expressions. Kuyruchuk plays along, drains the cups of revolting concoction offered to him without batting an eyelid, which irritates his host, who eventually suggests that they both go down on all fours and pretend to be dogs. Kuyruchuk obeys and his host mocks him by saying that Kuyruchuk has turned into a male dog. Kuyruchuk retorts that a strong dog has more dignity than a stinking rat. In another of the selected stories (*Kuyruchuk's predictions*) the narrator even relates that many believed that Kuyruchuk could transform into different animal shapes, assuming the appearance of a dragon, a golden eagle, a tiger or a wolf.

Kuyruchuk, like most Tricksters (indeed many of them still half-nomadic Kyrgyz people), is almost always on the road, he wanders with or without a specific motivation, and most of his adventures take place on the road. Sometimes he is on the way to sell sheep, or to accompany a rich patron, to take part in a funeral, or is looking for work, but often the purpose of his journey is not at all clear. But all his movements are geographically bounded and specify Kyrgyz land, typically the north, which is his home territory, and some stories take place in his home village. He is a somewhat "domesticated" Trickster, who is firmly anchored in a specific period of Kyrgyz history and landscape, which assures his authenticity as a historical person. Unlike the mythical Tricksters and folk heroes, he is placed in a specific time frame. References to historical events often provide the setting and the starting point for his tricks: sometimes the approximate or precise dates are provided, at other times a major event, such as mentioning that the story took place in the early years of collectivization provides a clue. Many of the Kuyruchuk stories contain references of a much more local character naming a particular spot in a certain village, indicating people's names and informing about specific customs of that region.

Kuyruchuk, the Kyrgyz Trickster has no doubt been tamed and reshaped by Soviet and postsocialist ideology. From unconscious, accidental transgressor of boundaries he has been turned into an ideologically conscious social engineer. He has been tamed and domesticated. It is all the more surprising that in spite of these manipulations Kuyruchuk has retained his basic characteristics of Trickster. Although never a mythical culture hero, he also reveals himself as an agent of change: he is credited with liberating the Kyrgyz from the blood-sucking Uzbek moneylenders, with freeing ordinary people from oppressive patrons and with changing the ways of new Soviet officials, influencing recruitment principles into the collective and changing people's notions of collective and private ownership, at least on the grassroots level. The fate of this figure, pushed to the margins of oral tradition studies demonstrates within the Central Asian context that Trickster is not the exclusive property of simple societies: the need to celebrate the spirit of disruption and renewal continues in complex societies and may be successfully mobilized for justifying new ideologies.

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