

Crossing Boundaries, Breaking Rules: Continuity and Social Transformation in Trickster Tales from Central Asia¹

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Introduction

The Arguments

Although oral literature has conventionally been considered a field of study for folklorists, anthropologists started taking an interest in the subject very early on, conceptualizing such materials as socially embedded communicative strategies.² The present paper investigates a body of texts that emerged in the Kyrgyz³ speech community in what is today northern Kyrgyzstan over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an effort to implement Soviet nationality policies, Soviet folklorists in the 1960s identified and collected a sizeable body of Kuyruchuk stories and published them in Russian (Bektenov 1964).⁴ Since Kyrgyzstan's declaration of independence in 1991, two new books have been published, one containing some of the figure's adventures and the other summarizing and analyzing stories about him, this time in Kyrgyz (Öskönalī uulu 1997, Kenchiev and Abdīrazakov 2002). The stories are generally simple and evoke the style of folktales; under socialism a number of such

¹ An earlier, shorter version of this article has appeared in German; see Bellér-Hann and Sharshenova 2008. It emerged from the project entitled *Kuyruchuk: Quotidian Application of Ancient Kyrgyz Wisdom*, funded by the Central Asia Research Initiative, Open Society Institute, Higher Education Support Program, 2002-04. Our thanks are due to Chetin Jumagulov, from whom the idea of the project originated and to Giedre Mickunaite for her valuable comments and help in improving the work at the initial stages of the project. We are grateful to Eva-Marie Dubuisson, who has given useful advice concerning both the structure and the theoretical emphasis of this reworked version, and to Ingeborg Baldauf, Beate Eschment, Chris Hann, Svetlana Jacquesson, and Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi for their insightful comments. Svetlana Jacquesson has also provided the map. We thank Donall Omaran, Jibek Iskakova, and Mark Hann for their support and help with proofreading.

² For a definition of oral literature and for an overview of earlier anthropological theories, see Murphy 1978.

³ The transcription of the terms "Kyrgyz" and "Kyrgyzstan" follows modern English usage. Other Kyrgyz terms are transcribed according to the system adopted in H. Komatsu et al. 2005.

⁴ It is not quite clear if Bektenov's work had been preceded by a Kyrgyz language publication or not. Unfortunately, none of the Kuyruchuk-related publications say much about the methods of accessing the stories, nor do they acknowledge the use of previous publications.

stories were published in journals aimed at a young readership (e.g. *Zhash Leninchi, Kirgizskie pioneri*), and Kuyruchuk is also mentioned in shorter publications (e.g. Bektenov 1959, 1978, 1981; Toygonbaeva 1987; Naymanbay 1990).

The paper is organized along two axes. First, it identifies a classic “Trickster” figure set in modern Kyrgyz history, ranging from the period of the last decades of Russian rule to early Soviet times. It will be shown how in the wake of major social upheavals, Central Asian oral tradition mobilizes the figure of the Trickster to demonstrate the ambiguities of everyday life at times of rapid political and social transformation. Second, the materials presented illuminate more general processes of cultural production and entextualization in socialist and postsocialist Central Asia. It will be argued that the Soviet and the Kyrgyz states at times deploy very similar strategies to pursue overlapping goals of identity-building. Shifting strategies aimed at supporting different state projects can be recognized in the meta-folklore of a text corpus taken from Kyrgyz oral tradition. Since the text corpus is available as printed materials, we see it as being situated at the interface of oral and written realms (Goody 1993).

The stories in question were published in Russian and Kyrgyz during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, and we have no detailed reliable information concerning performative and receptive aspects, yet they are clearly rooted within the established genre of Central Asian oral tradition. Given the lack of extratextual evidence, the lines of argument mentioned above will be elaborated on the basis of evidence provided by the stories themselves.⁵

In view of these two central concerns, the classification of the stories poses a dilemma. Several possibilities presented themselves. Of these we considered two in particular: one was to follow the historical setting of the stories, starting with Kuyruchuk’s adventures in the Russian Empire and continuing with those set in the young Soviet Union. The other was to concentrate on the major historical periods in which the stories were published: the Soviet Union in the early 1960s and the early years of independence in the mid-1990s. These two competing organizational possibilities underline the complex nature of the concept of “context,” ranging from the geographical/spatial to the broader social and historical.⁶

The latter option initially seemed more attractive, since it offered a suitable structure to elaborate on shifts in ideological strategies concerning important themes such as the unequal distribution of resources, the need for social justice, attitudes toward religion, the force of local tradition in constituting ethnic identity, inter-ethnic relations, and the like in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. After seriously considering this possibility, we have decided not to follow this path for several reasons.⁷ It must be emphasized that at no time has a systematic analysis of all the stories included in these volumes been carried out, and the same holds true for those stories

⁵ See note 21 below.

⁶ As has been elaborated in Godwin and Duranti 1992.

⁷ Raushan Sharshenova has translated into English a number of stories selected from the two published collections, with the aim of using them for her translation classes, in which she also wished to demonstrate the importance of persisting Kyrgyz traditions. As the project progressed, we further reduced the number of tales used for discussion in this paper. The present analysis is based on our repeated readings of this selected text corpus, which we believe to be representative of both collective volumes: 20 were translated from the Russian published in 1964 (Bektenov 1964) and 16 represent the Kyrgyz collection published in 1997 (Öskönali uulu 1997). For these representative examples, see the Appendix.

that have been published separately in various journals over the course of the socialist and postsocialist decades. A full comparison of the stories published in Soviet and post-Soviet times will become possible only when all printed stories from both periods have been systematically collected and analyzed. Following this path would be appropriate if we wished to focus exclusively on the deployment of oral tradition in support of state projects, a topic that certainly deserves more attention within the Central Asian context. However, such a focus would not do full justice to the Kuyruchuk corpus as we know it at present, since not all stories included in the collections bear explicit, identifiable markers of ideological manipulation. The ideologically “unmarked” ones are nonetheless relevant in upholding and reproducing the Trickster tradition. We also feel the need to make a case for recognizing Trickster cycles as a well-established genre in Central Asian verbal arts since, although Central Asian oral tradition seems to be full of Tricksters, so far these figures have been mostly neglected by international scholarship. When they have attracted attention, typically no explicit connection has been made between them and the Tricksters of other oral traditions.⁸ One reason for this neglect may be that an exaggerated persistent focus on heroic epics, also motivated by nation-building efforts, has diverted attention from other types of oral traditions, although, as we shall see, the latter reveal just as much if not more about social relations in the local setting as do the epics.

For all of these reasons we have decided to use a more conservative classification based not on the setting of the *cultural (re-)production* of these texts (which should be done by future research) but on the historical context in which the stories themselves are embedded. In this way we maintain a dual focus, on the one hand connecting Central Asian oral tradition to the Trickster tradition of the world, while also pointing out how repeated re-contextualizations of selected parts of Kyrgyz oral tradition have been harnessed in service of state projects. At the end of this paper we shall attempt to bring together these two strands of inquiry.

The Protagonist

Kudaybergen Ömürzak uulu is said to have been born in 1866, in Kızıl-Tuu village, Jungal region, Narın oblast, and he died in 1940 in Kızıl-Tuu village, Jungal region, in the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.⁹ He later acquired the nickname Kuyruchuk, meaning “Little Tail,” when his special talents started manifesting themselves. Kuyruchuk came from a very poor family: his father was a shepherd who herded his landlord Sultankhan’s sheep while his mother cleaned, cooked, and washed for the rich man’s family. She died of hunger and exhaustion. We are not told what happened to his father, but following the death of his mother, as a young child Kuyruchuk had to take care of his younger brothers and sisters. He did this by begging, helping out for small rewards, 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 famous Kyrgyz epic, *Manas*, when he was nineteen, which meant that he became a recognized *akin*, or “singer of

⁸ The only exceptions known to us are an article about the Uyghur Taz (Bellér-Hann 2004), and a book about Nasreddin Hoca, whose figure connects Central Asian and Anatolian Turkish oral traditions (Başgöz and Boratav 1998).

⁹ See the map on the following page.



tales.”¹⁰ Although he was an excellent singer, he did not consider himself comparable to the great contemporary bards such as Toktogul, Jengijok, or Eshmambet; his unassuming utterance “I have poetry” was widely known. Nevertheless, he was an excellent *akin*, and some of his public performances were memorable events. So it was no accident that in 1928 in Frunze (modern Bishkek) several parts of the epic poem *Manas* were recorded following his recited version (Kenchiev and Abdīrazakov 2002:36-80). We know that he was married, had children, was an able horseman and a good fighter, and above all, served as a defender of the poor and oppressed.

A Kyrgyz Robin Hood, Kuyruchuk lived much of his life under Czarist rule, and he was 51 at the time of the October Revolution. By that point he was a well-known figure in his native Jungal region in northern Kyrgyzstan and beyond, and his opinions and actions carried weight. He spent his final years in the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR, working at the Bishkek Philharmonic Orchestra, after having spent a great deal of his life traveling.¹¹

¹⁰ To explain the Kyrgyz term we have borrowed Lord’s famous title (Lord 2000). On the *Manas*, see, for example, *Manas* 1968, Straube 2007. For Kuyruchuk’s memoirs, see Chorobaev 1940.

¹¹ Bektenov 1964:5-9; see also the entry on him in Asanov 1998. Of course, at this point it remains an open question as to what extent these renderings do justice to Kuyruchuk’s actual biography.

Kuyruchuk was more than a mere singer of tales. He was, according to Russian and Kyrgyz commentators, also a lover of jokes, an eloquent orator, a seer, and above all a man of the people. Acting as a social critic, he poked fun at the rich, semi-feudal landlords and merchants, who in presocialist Central Asia had been the oppressors of the subjugated and the downtrodden (Kenchiev and Abdırazakov 2002:36-80; Öskönali uulu 1997:226-28). A champion of the principles of equality, in Soviet times he continued to criticize social misdemeanor, which he defined not in terms of accepted communal norms or established legal systems, but in terms of his own sense of social justice and morality. His social criticism invariably found expression in his roguery, ruses, and pranks, and the Kuyruchuk stories undoubtedly owe their sustained popularity to their fundamentally humorous nature: they used to circulate as local oral tradition to be eventually collected and fixed in Soviet and post-Independence publications.¹²

Here we have to emphasize that we are not so much interested in Kuyruchuk as a historical figure whose historicity needs to be proven and reconstructed. Rather, we are interested in him as a Trickster, also present in European, North and South American, African, South Asian, Semitic, Chinese, and Japanese tales and myths, as a figure who in the Kyrgyz stories appears as historically firmly embedded and ideologized. The stories constructed him as a folk Trickster, who, in spite of various ideological manipulations, has retained his essential ambiguities and other features that in their entirety continue to mark him out as a Trickster. Thus the significance of the Kuyruchuk stories goes well beyond Kyrgyz oral tradition; they represent important additions to the oral traditions of the world.

The Trickster

The figure of the Trickster has interested representatives of many scholarly disciplines, including anthropology, religious studies, classics, modern literary studies, psychology, education, semiotics, and history as well as the history of art, to name a few. Although we are fully aware of the abundance of relevant scholarly analyses, for the purpose of this paper we shall only make reference to some such studies, privileging the anthropological perspective as well as literary approaches to oral traditions.¹³ Among the views of classical theorists one can identify both relativist (Boas, for example) as well as universalist approaches (such as Radin, Kerényi, and Jung), the latter also featuring a strong psychological twist. Without unequivocally accepting the Trickster as something of an archetype, we argue that Trickster stories should be recognized as a genre in Central Asian oral tradition, and that they are comparable with similar genres occurring in the oral traditions of many other regions of the world.¹⁴

¹² Some years ago Raushan Sharshenova formed the impression that, although Kuyruchuk tales are still known, they were rapidly disappearing. Recently, however, the anthropologist Svetlana Jacquesson has found that there is a certain revival of interest in them (personal communication).

¹³ But we are not referring to studies pertaining to the occurrence and treatment of the figure in literary works.

¹⁴ In the concept of genre we see “a distinct form of discourse” (Ben-Amos 1976:xxx).

The term Trickster was first used by Daniel G. Brinton in his *Myths of the New World* (1876, quoted in Ricketts 1987:51) as the generic name for an imaginary figure appearing in the oral traditions of many cultures all over the world. Although the Trickster takes many forms and shapes, his basic characteristics as jester and entertainer and the apparent discrepancy between his attributes as “culture hero” (who contributes to the creation of the world, or helps make the world safe or at least better for humans) and “selfish buffoon” (who attempts the inappropriate) appear to justify speaking in more general terms of the Trickster as a type.¹⁵ Tricksters are endowed with special capacities, of which their intelligence and mental agility stand out: these enable them “to ease their passage through a treacherous and dangerous world, usually in spite of and at the expense of more powerful adversaries” (Owomoyela 1997:x).

In this connection, it is perhaps not inappropriate to introduce the Greek term *mêtis*, translated as “cunning intelligence,” which draws upon “craft, skill, eloquence, and resourceful cleverness” (Zemon Davis 2006:266). It also comprises deceit, lie, and even the occasional disloyal trick, those “weapons of the weak” typically employed by those confronted with someone stronger or more powerful than themselves. In Greek mythology *mêtis* is typically at work in ambiguous situations at unstable times, and is characterized by multiplicity, polymorphism, diversity, movement, and incessant change that may require tricks such as metamorphosis or disguise, bearing “on fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other” (Detienne and Vernant 1978:20).

It comes as no surprise, then, that one central feature of the Trickster stories is the deeply paradoxical nature of their protagonist. Lévi-Strauss explains this characteristic with the figure’s essentially mediating function: his oscillation between the two poles means that “he must retain something of that duality—namely an ambiguous and equivocal character” (1963:226). The Trickster has often been described as an incorrigible boundary crosser, who is both human and divine. He often appears as a man (very seldom as a woman); Hermes, Saint Peter, Till Eulenspiegel, or the Taz in Uyghur/Central Asian tradition are all human in appearance (Hynes and Steele 1993; Williams 2000; Rüegg 2007:33-35; Bellér-Hann 2004); in North American and African traditions he almost always appears in animal shape, either as a raven, a coyote, a spider, a hare, or a tortoise endowed with human qualities.¹⁶

He may defy gender boundaries, for example by dressing or speaking like a woman. He also mediates between social groups without fully identifying with any of these, and his tricks may even involve temporarily crossing the boundaries separating life and death. Trickster figures also connect past, present, and future through soothsaying, divination, and seeing what is hidden, be it lost objects or concealed human characteristics, the past history or future fate of an unknown person.¹⁷ Following Van Gennep and Victor Turner, this permanent state on the margins can be best described with the concept of liminality, which characterizes the court jester

¹⁵ For brief overviews of the main directions of Trickster research, see Basso 1987:4-5; Rüegg 2007:41-60.

¹⁶ For an animal Trickster in the European tradition, see the figure of Fox Reinhard or Reinecke Fuchs (Rüegg 2007:30-31).

¹⁷ For a functional explanation of this Trickster characteristic, see Rüegg 2007:37.

as much as some symbolic figures in folk literature. They usually come from the lower classes or represent despised or marginal groups, are opposed to the dominant, ordered structure, and stand for anti-structure, the moral values of *communitas* (Turner 1995:108-11).

One of the Trickster's striking characteristics is his accentuated bodily nature; he often has exaggerated body parts and biological drives, above all an insatiable appetite. Many of the stories start with the problem of the Trickster getting hungry, so he sets out to satisfy his needs, using tricks and duplicity. In the process, he may be tricked and humiliated himself, but he also achieves his goal.

Through breaking social rules and norms, the Trickster draws attention to them, which is why these tales are an excellent vehicle for reaffirming the very same rules that the Trickster challenges. The rebellion of mythical hero-Tricksters in the beginning of the world may end in their providing humankind with essential inventions such as fire or language. The North American Winnebago Trickster was credited with no less than the creation of the world (Radin 1956). Thus the Trickster's disruptive and sometimes even destructive behavior makes place for the new: he is a potentially creative force, a transformer. He often acts in an impulsive and uninhibited manner; he is unable to tell good from evil—religious, moral, and social norms appear to have little meaning to him, but some Tricksters are conscious defenders of social justice.

The Trickster is often taught in introductory courses in cultural anthropology and in the history of religions, which in itself suggests that comedy and laughter are part and parcel of everyday life and of religious belief (Pelton 1992:122; Rüegg 2007). Even those Tricksters who lack mythological grandeur and appear as comic characters in folktales have a religious dimension. Uniting aspects of the divine and the human, perfection and imperfection, the Trickster stands for no less than the human condition for many (Sullivan 1987, Rüegg 2007:16-17).

Kuyruchuk as Trickster

From Soviet times we have no published analysis of the Kuyruchuk tales. In their post-Soviet study, the Kyrgyz authors Kenchiev and Abdīrazakov stress Kuyruchuk's peculiar sense of humor, his ability to imitate both animals and people, his storytelling and singing skills, his talent to improvise, his "prophetic abilities," his strong sense of social justice, his humanity, his generosity, and his courage (2002). However, even these Kyrgyz authors, who praise him as the embodiment of Kyrgyz values and as the depository of positive traditions, have to admit a certain ambiguity, which is invariably explained away with Kuyruchuk's propensity to laughter and entertainment. We argue that approaching him as a Trickster provides the clue to this intrinsic ambiguity.

Kuyruchuk is in some respects very different from the classical Trickster figures such as Hermes in Greek mythology, Coyote of Navajo tales, Eshu of Yoruba stories, or Raven of the Tsimshian cycle. They are all mythical figures who transgress boundaries of order, and through this act they change life for humankind. Raven's theft brings daylight to the dark world, Coyote steals fire, Hermes invents the lyre (and perhaps also sacrifice), and Eshu invents divination and

sacrifice (Hyde 1998).¹⁸ In contrast, Kuyruchuk was a historical figure;¹⁹ we know his date and place of birth, key events from his life, and one Kyrgyz encyclopedia entry even includes a photo of him (Asanov 1998:270).

Like other Tricksters he is in constant motion, and most of his adventures take place on the road. Sometimes he is on his way to sell sheep, to accompany a rich patron, to take part in a funeral, or to look for work, but often the purpose of his journey is not at all clear. All of his movements are geographically bounded and specify Kyrgyz land, typically the north, which is his home territory, while 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, a feature that underlines his historical authenticity. References to historical events often provide the setting and the starting point for his tricks: sometimes approximate or precise dates are provided; at other times a hint at a major political event provides a clue, such as mentioning that the story took place in the early years of collectivization.

Kuyruchuk’s geographical and cultural embeddedness are part and parcel of this assumed authenticity, since, as has been pointed out with reference to Till Eulenspiegel, an identifiable social setting is needed to understand the prevailing norms that he disregards or violates (Williams 2000:146). Although a specific historical timeframe is not an essential component of Trickster tales, when it is introduced it has the role of pinning down normative rules characteristic of a period. A major historical turning point accompanied by all-encompassing social transformations involves both the persistence as well as the disruption and occasionally the subversion of existing rules. The time when the traditional social order is not merely called into question but is turned upside down is a fertile ground upon which the Trickster can play and demonstrate the ambiguities inherent in everyday life.²⁰

In what follows we shall give a brief analysis of the selected stories, demonstrating to what extent Kuyruchuk fits the general model of the Trickster.²¹ We do not wish to claim that this correspondence is complete; there is no Trickster in the world’s oral traditions who displays all the characteristics ascribed to the assumed ideal type figure. Neither do we focus on the question of the social function of these stories, since we know nothing about the performance and reception of these traditions. Instead, we shall try to pay equal attention to correspondences and regional/cultural specificities, while pointing out tendencies that reflect ideological strategies. Although individual stories are introduced under specific labels, most of them could be

¹⁸ For the Trickster in Greek mythology, see Kerényi 1956 and Detienne and Vernant 1978. For a somewhat more recent collection of Trickster studies, see Hynes and Doty 1993.

¹⁹ For a hypothesis that Trickster figures could have their origins in historical figures, see Van Deursen 1931.

²⁰ For a functionalist explanation of the Trickster’s role at times of major social upheavals, see Williams 2000:147.

²¹ The present analysis is based on a selection of 36 Kuyruchuk stories, all of them translated by Raushan Sharshenova either from Russian or from Kyrgyz, with 20 tales from Bektenov (1964) and 16 published after independence by Öskönalī uulu (1997), himself a native of the Jumgal region. All 36 stories are published in the Appendix, arranged in the order in which they are first mentioned in our essay. In the translations every effort was made to follow the original closely; however, occasionally changes were deemed appropriate to facilitate comprehension.

mentioned under more than one subheading on account of the referential richness lurking behind the simple style.

Name and Early Years

Kuyruchuk's official name is the Central Asian Islamic "Kudaybergen" meaning "God-given," which is suggestive of connections to the divine. Although the explanation for his nickname, Kuyruchuk, that is, "Little Tail," is that his adventures follow him like a tail, it may also be suggestive of his Trickster nature. The story titled *I Am Kuyruchuk* (1964) is built on name symbolism and the animal motif. Kuyruchuk is confronted with a malicious rich man nicknamed "Rat." He pretends to be a generous host to the tired and hungry visitors as custom dictates, but he has the habit of feeding his guests bad food. He then laughs at their tortured expressions, as the unwritten laws of hospitality oblige them to consume the food. Kuyruchuk plays along, draining the cups of the revolting concoction offered to him without batting an eyelid. This 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 his guest 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*, 1964), the narrator relates that many believed Kuyruchuk could transform into different animal shapes, assuming the appearance of a dragon, a golden eagle, a tiger, or a wolf. Many other stories include the motif of his imitating an animal.

From *Kuyruchuk's Childhood* (1997) we learn that his early years were marked by suffering from rickets, a painful, debilitating illness from which he is eventually cured, using time-honored but drastic methods. Because of his illness he is swaddled in a specially designed cradle, and when visitors come he greets them from the cradle as if he were an adult, but we are not informed how old he was at the time. Hearing "a baby speak like an adult" implies precociousness. The childhood illness marks him out as different, and early maturity, unusual intelligence, and the unresolved ambiguity of real and pretend all fit the Trickster's nature (Ricketts 1993). Kuyruchuk's childhood illness and miraculous recovery, after which his cunning and intelligence start to be manifested, remind one of the fateful illness of the future shaman, a quality signifying that he has been chosen to become a mediator between the spirit and the human world. Ricketts' study of a wide range of North American Trickster tales seeks to explain the connection between the shaman and the Trickster and concludes that the two stand in structural opposition to each other. The shaman enlists the help of the spirit world, while the Trickster has no such belief, and Ricketts convincingly argues that many of the Trickster stories are parodies of shamanism. In this connection Hyde remarks that, while the shaman represents rituals that have been created to make order in the chaotic world, the Trickster, a symbol of chaos, mocks rituals, and by doing so he breaks the rules and opens the way for renewal and change (1998:295).

As he grows, Kuyruchuk finds ample opportunity to display his wit. Although he himself steals on occasion to feed himself and his hungry brothers and sisters, during his first employment in Tokmok he works very hard as a rich man's servant. Soon he becomes promoted to watchman, and he earns his employer's respect by catching some thieves (*Kuyruchuk's*

Adolescence, 1997). The thief who catches thieves displays the duplicity characteristic of all Tricksters.

Some of the stories cited above were included in the Soviet collection, others in the post-Independence collections. Apart from establishing Kuyruchuk as a member of the laboring classes and an opponent of the rich, they seem to be by and large ideologically unmarked: Soviet propaganda and Kyrgyz traditions, themes that become prominent in some other stories, are not foregrounded.

Extolling Kyrgyz Traditions: Rituals, Hospitality, Morality

In line with the Trickster tradition, many of Kuyruchuk's adventures revolve around the cooking pot. In *Supotay's Spirit* (1964) we learn that, as a child, he often resorted to stealing food to satisfy his hunger, and it is the promise of food that causes him to help the womenfolk prepare the commemoration feast to mark the first anniversary of the rich Supotay's death. Kuyruchuk climbs into the rich man's grave and, as the mourning crowd arrives carrying ceremonial food, he responds from the grave to the widow's exaggerated wailing, imitating the voice of the dead man. He reproaches the woman for having been unfaithful to his memory by starting an affair almost immediately after his death. The voice of the "dead" and his public revelations of village gossip frighten away the crowd, who leave all the ceremonial food there, which Kuyruchuk then shares with the other children. In a truly Kyrgyz and Islamic setting, young Kuyruchuk tricks the adults, plays with death, and mocks it in order to satisfy his hunger. His trick is successful because he, like the North American Coyote Trickster, is an excellent imitator (Hyde 1998:42-43). As a true Trickster, he mocks the most solemn of rituals, which, while fully integrated into the Islamic belief system, has the domestic cult (the veneration of the spirits of the dead) at its core.²² By poking fun at the death rituals and essentially preventing villagers from carrying out the prescribed rites, he breaks taboos and disrupts order.²³ Furthermore, to redress the balance, young Kuyruchuk also shares the ritual food thus gained with the poor children of his village.²⁴

Playing with death is a recurring theme in the Kuyruchuk corpus. In *I Am Dead Now* (1964) he takes part in a wrestling competition organized as part of the commemoration feast for a rich man. Having found out that his opponent is poor but has to support a big family, he lets him win, pretending to be badly injured himself. Upon hearing that his host confiscated the cattle that should have been given to the winner, he claims that if he dies, the host on whose land he had been killed should pay compensation for his death. Kuyruchuk then spreads the news of his own approaching death. This is an open challenge and a threat for an ensuing blood feud, so the

²² For an elaboration of the significance of the domestic cult, see DeWeese 1994. For the social and political importance of Kyrgyz funerary rites, see Jacquesson 2008.

²³ Eulenspiegel is also well known for introducing disorder in religious rituals and even misusing religious sacraments (Williams 2000:162).

²⁴ Kuyruchuk's introducing disorder into religious ritual echoes Eulenspiegel's prank, who dresses up as a priest and, having got hold of a relic, claims that only those women who have remained faithful to their husbands are allowed to make an offering. He then makes a handsome profit from the women who wish to publicly demonstrate their fidelity (Williams 2000:165).

host of the commemoration feast visits Kuyruchuk on his “deathbed.” Kuyruchuk orders him to give the winner his dues, and threatens to reveal a disgraceful story about the young man’s late father unless his wishes are fulfilled. To what extent attacks on superstition can be interpreted as supporting Soviet propaganda remains open, since taboo-breaking and parodying existing institutions also happens to fit archetypal Trickster behavior, and anticlericalism was also characteristic of many a medieval fabliau in Christian settings.²⁵

Supotay’s spirit has also shown Kuyruchuk as a guardian of sexual morality, a theme that recurs in *The Disgraced Jigit* (1964). On the road as usual, Kuyruchuk is in need of hospitality and accommodation. He is confronted with an elderly couple and their young daughter-in-law, who is about to commit adultery with a rich man’s son. Kuyruchuk understands the secret signs exchanged by the lovers while making arrangements for the young man’s nocturnal visit, and makes sure that he is assigned the young woman’s bed instead. At night he is visited by the young man: in the darkness Kuyruchuk imitates the woman’s voice, but when it comes to physical contact, he squeezes the young man’s hand very hard in order to cause him pain, thus revealing his true identity and disgracing him. His pretending to be a woman reminds us of Trickster the imitator and Trickster the cross-dresser, who straddles the dividing line between the sexes. As an upholder of sexual morality embedded in pre-Soviet patriarchal ideology, Kuyruchuk here deviates from the “archetypal” Trickster, who is often characterized by an exaggerated sexual appetite. Nevertheless, since some of the Kuyruchuk tales were said to be “unsuitable for young maidens’ ears” (Bektenov 1964:5), or entertaining stories about libertine women “which would be difficult to put down to paper” (Kenchiev and Abdirazakov 2002:55), we can assume that such motifs were purged from both the Soviet versions (because of their incompatibility with the ideal of *homo sovieticus*) and from the post-Independence Kyrgyz versions (because they do not fit the national self-image).

Women in the selected tales are mostly haughty and young from rich families to whom Kuyruchuk stands in structural opposition. In *Young Wife, Young Mare* (1964) Kuyruchuk is confronted with a spoiled young woman who, in the absence of her husband, fails to offer the expected hospitality to her visitor on account of his poor clothes. Kuyruchuk explains the situation to the arriving host using symbolic language: he starts kicking his mare. To his astonished host he explains that this is how disobedient mares that disgrace him in front of other people need to be treated. Although these stories transform Kuyruchuk into a relentless guardian of sexual morality, they also aptly reflect the perpetuation of a conservative patriarchal ideology through major political shifts that is consistent with our present knowledge of gender relations under socialism and postsocialism. Although we know that he had a family, in the stories he typically appears as a solitary figure, a loner with no companion, factors that conveniently position him on the margins of community; he is simultaneously integrated into and detached from it.

Hospitality, the obligation to offer, accept, and share food, is a highly valued social institution in Central Asia and continues today to be identified as an essential Kyrgyz national virtue. A number of Kuyruchuk stories focus on this theme, which is closely connected to the protagonist’s relentless interest in the cooking pot. As we have already seen, in some stories

²⁵ For this last observation we are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers.

Kuyruchuk provokes and shames inhospitable landlords or landladies, as is also exemplified by the tale *As the Call, So Is the Echo* (1964). Kuyruchuk gets caught in the rain while traveling, and is forced to ask for shelter in a village. Counting on the obligatory hospitality expected among the Kyrgyz on such occasions, he enters a yurt where his hosts violate this age-honored customary law: neither is he offered the seat of honor, nor is he given any food. Kuyruchuk provokes his host by taking bowls of soup almost by force without being offered any. When he finally reveals his true identity, he threatens his host with spreading the word about his lack of generosity. The host apologizes and invites Kuyruchuk for a meal, but once again he reveals his meanness. This time, Kuyruchuk mobilizes his talent and fame as a singer, who can recite the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, and mocks his host by performing only two lines of the epic. The poet's miserliness with words echoes the host's parsimony. Published in 1964, this story aptly illustrates how Soviet ideology fostered an attenuated form of national expression as long as it was free of religious connotations. Kuyruchuk's talent for telling entertaining stories, engaging in verbal duels, and reciting the *Manas* emphasize his closeness to the Trickster; in some tales the Trickster may be credited with inventing language, but even when this is not the case he is a lively, articulate, and eloquent talker, a master of speaking (Hyde 1998:76, 299).²⁶

Hospitality continues to be extolled as a Kyrgyz virtue in the post-Independence collection. In one such story the protagonist himself pretends first to be inhospitable, creating tension and discomfort in his guests, but eventually assumes the role of an excellent host (*How Kuyruchuk Played a Trick on His Visitors*, 1997). Here, hospitality as a national trait is implicitly praised through the Trickster's prank.

In contrast, *The Leprous Yak* (1964) bears explicit ideological markers: Kuyruchuk's host slaughters his guest's horse and serves its flesh to him, before accusing Kuyruchuk of ripping off poor people. Finally he sets Kuyruchuk a trap, offering him a number of animals as compensation for the insults. He brings more than he had promised, hoping that Kuyruchuk will take everything, thus revealing his greed. But Kuyruchuk only takes the horse, distributing the rest of the cattle among the village poor and setting the surplus animal free, describing it "as leprous as his host." The protagonist and his adversary engage in a certain role reversal typical of the Trickster, which involves the abuse of the very institution of hospitality. This negative hospitality involves a major deviation from the law of hospitality and is peppered with insults. The conflict between host and guest is an ideological one over the distribution of resources, which is finally resolved by Kuyruchuk's generous redistribution of the surplus.

Agent of Redistribution

In the above story a close conceptual connection is made between hospitality and charity, both being institutionalized forms of redistribution. It also demonstrates Kuyruchuk's wish for social justice, which is curiously reconcilable with the Trickster's drive to satisfy his own needs. In the introduction we have characterized Kuyruchuk as a Kyrgyz Robin Hood: the comparison is fitting, since he often takes from the rich and gives to the poor. In *Supotay's Spirit* (1964) he shares the food left by the frightened mourners by the graveside with the poor children, and

²⁶ Eulenspiegel was famous for his linguistic pranks (Williams 2000:167-68).

sharing everything he has with the poor is what most likely made him suited to represent socialist ideology.

In *Hey, This Is Kuyruchuk* (1997) he makes a handsome profit using his landlord's animals in the traditional ram fight: the setting is Kyrgyzstan, the fights take place between the rams of the northerners and southerners, and for no apparent reason Kuyruchuk's landlord's animal wins all the time, it seems, only because of his connection to Kuyruchuk. He shares the profits with his fellow shepherds. In the second half of the same story, Kuyruchuk confronts the representatives of the religious establishment: he takes the alms collected by a Muslim preacher on the eve of an Islamic holiday, and distributes them among the poor and destitute. Thus the religious dignitary is shamed, and has to admit Kuyruchuk's moral superiority. In this connection another story is remembered by the narrator, in which Kuyruchuk had collected money from the rich passers-by in the market place: whomever he asked for a certain sum could not refuse him; they felt compelled to give. He then distributed the money among the poor and needy.

One of Kuyruchuk's essential, unchanging characteristics is his poverty, which is also emphasized in his appearance: he is typically poorly dressed, sometimes even in tatters. Like many other Trickster figures, he comes from a modest background; he is socially marginal by birth, sometimes appearing as a shepherd, a servant, a laborer, or a client but never as a patron. He is thus a natural representative of the oppressed, subordinated, and exploited social groups, and therefore of Soviet ideology. However, as a Manaschi or singer of tales, he is often invited by the power holders, be it a traditional tribal leader or headman of a Soviet *kolkhoz*. In this mediating role between social groups, he reminds us of Eulenspiegel's popularity with the nobility, the ambiguity of their obedience in both cases indicating their anarchic potential in any ordered society (cf. Williams 2000:158-59).

As these stories testify, Kuyruchuk is different from the Trickster of myths, who "knows neither good nor evil yet is responsible for both" (Radin 1956:ix). His motivations may be very un-Trickster-like, but in his acting as an agent of reallocation we may recognize Trickster-like behavior; as Hyde (1998:72) puts it, "our ideas about property and theft depend on a set of assumptions about how the world is divided up. Trickster's lies and thefts challenge those premises and in so doing reveal their artifice and suggest alternatives." His collecting donations from rich individuals in the marketplace stands for his opposition to market forces. His redistributing wealth demonstrates his role as an agent of social change but also echoes the most fundamental principles of socialist ideology. Kuyruchuk does not use any special tricks here; he relies on his innate ability, so that when he asks people for something they are unable to refuse.²⁷

Kuyruchuk's opposition to the market and his dislike of merchants whom he perceives as bloodsuckers and swindlers are recurring themes of the stories. In *The Three Merchants* (1964) Kuyruchuk is on his way back home, accompanied by poor shepherds without any provisions for the long journey, when they meet three rich merchants. Pretending to be a rich man himself, Kuyruchuk boasts about his possessions and is invited by the merchants to share their meal. He touches the meal dished up in one communal pot but then refuses to eat from it. By way of explanation, he claims that he had been to the bushes but forgot to wash his hands afterwards,

²⁷ Awareness of inequalities and a strong sense of social justice are also characteristic of the Eulenspiegel stories (Williams 2000).

and the wild onions used for preparing the meal had also been picked there; thus, the food is doubly polluted. The merchants refuse to eat it, and it is then left to the poor shepherds.

In stories set in the presocialist era, Kuyruchuk calls dominant property rights into question using methods that verge on the amoral: his innate ability to get what he wants, his verbal talents, cunning, force, or a combination of these. In some stories he takes the initiative; having observed injustice, he quickly thinks of a scheme to redress the balance. In other stories, coincidence plays an important part: he is provoked and he merely responds.

In *He Bought a Head* (1964) Kuyruchuk is confronted by the powerful Bekten, whose violence and exploitation is a burden to the people. Bekten suggests that Kuyruchuk strike his head in exchange for a large sum of money, thinking that Kuyruchuk would not dare to do this. Kuyruchuk uses only force, rather than wit and cunning; he simply strikes Bekten's head with all his might. Bekten's men do not dare to interfere since they see this as part of a normal bet, and Kuyruchuk, having been paid the money promised, warns him not to continue with his cruel and oppressive ways.

A similar end was served in *The Slander* (1964), in which a rich man accused a poor person of theft. To save the innocent man from imprisonment and from the burden of having to pay compensation, Kuyruchuk pleads guilty instead, and, upon being questioned by the judge, he starts accusing his opponent of robbing travelers and of having taken and slaughtered his horse. The judge is confused by this sudden, unexpected inversion of roles, and acquits the accused, refusing to deal with the case any more.

Unsurprisingly, social justice is a recurring theme in the 1964 stories, but these themes are not entirely absent from the post-Independence stories either. *Hey, This Is Kuyruchuk* (1997) is particularly interesting since it allows for several interpretations: the commitment to social justice and the need for redistribution to alleviate poverty fit both Soviet and postsocialist state ideologies, as does the anti-clerical stance. However, it could be argued that, unlike the Soviet publications that attacked religious practices considered to be central to Kyrgyz traditions, here only corrupt religious dignitaries are criticized, a change in focus that indicates a shift in state ideology. At the same time, the question arises to what extent an overt criticism of the market principle in post-Independence Kyrgyzstan can be reconciled with the dominant state project.

It is our contention that these apparently simple stories contain multiple referential layers and interpretative possibilities. Precisely because of the inherent qualities of the Trickster tales, they are also suitable for conveying the ambiguities that underlie ostensibly clearly formulated state ideologies and policies.

Ethnic Boundaries

Divisions between local groups, competition, and ethnic conflict are repeatedly addressed in the stories. We have seen how the story titled *Hey, This Is Kuyruchuk* (1997) makes reference to the division between Northerners and Southerners. In *The Dead Man Has Come to Life* (1964) Kuyruchuk is asked to assist with washing the corpse of a dead Kazak. He secretly manipulates the body parts of the corpse so that it moves, creating the impression that it has come back to life. Then he pretends to have a fight with the dead man in the tent and comes out victorious,

gaining the respect of the Kazak for the Kyrgyz with this heroic deed; the apparent endorsement of Kyrgyz superiority is of course highly ambivalent.

In *How Did Kuyruchuk Acquire This Nickname?* (1997), Uzbek merchants are presented as usurers who charge high interests when lending money to the Kyrgyz. They are also accused of using religion to gain profit, for example by selling amulets to barren women, thus abusing religious sentiments. They also take advantage of young girls, and rob people. Sharing a tent with some Uzbeks, Kuyruchuk crawls into the bed of one of them who had to briefly go out at night, and snarls, pretending to be a dog. To get rid of the dog in his bed, the returning Uzbek whips the “dog” but hits his landlord instead, while Kuyruchuk darts back to his own bed without anyone noticing. The result is a major argument between the Uzbek merchant and his landlord, whose face becomes disfigured from the stroke intended for the “dog.” Only Kuyruchuk’s mediation saves the situation, advising the Uzbeks to disappear before dawn in order to prevent revenge on the part of the Kyrgyz. Thus Kuyruchuk saves his own people from a major infliction, the Uzbek usurers, an act that amounts to a heroic deed.

In *Dmitriy’s Story* (1997) Kuyruchuk once again engages in the redistribution of resources but the theme is presented with an ethnic twist. Dmitriy, a young Russian boy, is sent by his father to sell fruit at the commemoration feast organized in memory of the death of a Kyrgyz strong man. The Kyrgyz take his fruit, but many refuse to pay him. Having learned about this obvious injustice, Kuyruchuk calls on the participants of the feast to donate money for the young Russian to compensate him for his loss. Kuyruchuk once again champions social justice, but this time in an inter-ethnic setting: in the confrontation between the two groups it is the Russian whose rights he defends, and the Kyrgyz who commit injustice. In the selection of tales this is the only story where ethnic conflict is represented in such a way that Kuyruchuk takes the side of the non-Kyrgyz. This fits his Trickster-like nature as a boundary-crosser, as well as the colonial situation of Soviet rule, in which the Russians had the upper hand. The post-Independence context of the publication suggests ambivalence: it could be a reference to the persisting colonial legacy as well as a critique of Kyrgyz nationalism.

Ethnic difference figures in both Soviet and post-Independence stories, although our small sample points to a heightened emphasis in the 1997 publication. Regional divisions are mentioned only in the latter. While our sample is too modest for making broad generalizations, such a shift of emphasis could be considered a reflection of an increasing interest in such differences. However, it is less obvious to us to what extent this could be taken as an accurate reflection of the dominant state ideology, which at the time of publication still emphasized a commitment to ethnic diversity, although actual policy was already tending to favor the Kyrgyz at the expense of other groups. This situation again suggests that the stories should be seen as reflections of the inherent ambiguities of the state project, rather than simple, one-to-one mirroring strategies.

Acting for His Own Profit

In some of the stories no obvious trick is played; instead, Kuyruchuk makes use of his innate powers to force others to give him what he wants. Typically he does not abuse his supernatural ability to gain profit. He mobilizes his gift to benefit others, and when he is offered

more than what he has asked for, he refuses to take the extras (*Kuyruchuk's Tale* 1997). Although some of the stories suggest that he shares out the profits he gains from his confrontations with the rich, in others this is not made clear, leaving room for considerable ambiguity. In *How Kuyruchuk Came In Dry From the Rain* (1964), he is accompanying a rich man on his travels when they are caught in the rain. Dressed poorly and thinly as usual, Kuyruchuk wants to hurry to the next village but his patron does not let him. He then falls off his horse at the next lightning strike and pretends to be dying. Afraid of being accused of having caused the famous jester's death, the head of the party wraps Kuyruchuk up in a warm coat and carries him to the next village as fast as he can. As Kuyruchuk "decides" not to die after all, his superior is so relieved that he even presents his thick fur coat to Kuyruchuk.

In *Thirty Samovars and Two Old Goats* (1964) Kuyruchuk tricks the rich of his village in order to be able to commemorate the first anniversary of his mother's death. He borrows samovars from each, then invites them to the commemoration feast at which he serves them the chewy meat of old goats. During the ensuing horse race he gives the participants the borrowed samovars as prizes, making sure that each person gets his own property back. In these tales Kuyruchuk instrumentalizes his wit not for the communal good but to help himself to perform his traditional duties, which were evidently compatible with the ideal of the *homo sovieticus*.

Some of these stories seem to lack humor and wit either because they have been "sanitized" and made more palatable, or because the emphasis is on the shocking display of Kuyruchuk's courage, insights, and other superhuman abilities. In *Who Will God Listen To?* (1964) Kuyruchuk gambles and wins a flock of sheep from the wealthy Esenbay. Instead of simply distributing the animals among the poor, he drives them to the market and offers them to people on credit, saying that they only have to pay him back when Esenbay dies. The sheep are thus "sold" quickly, but Esenbay, having heard about the events, accuses Kuyruchuk of wishing his death. Kuyruchuk's response befits the Trickster: he replies that he was the only one wishing for Esenbay's death, while he caused ten other people to pray for his longevity. God would surely listen to the prayers of ten rather than to the prayer of one, he says, thus proving that Esenbay should be grateful to him. The story could of course be read as yet another example of anti-religious Soviet propaganda. However, such simplistic interpretation would ignore Kuyruchuk's Trickster-like propensity to act in order to gain private profit through questionable means, such as gambling and perhaps even usury.

Kuyruchuk and the Young Soviet Union

So far we have introduced those stories that are situated in presocialist times. *Tell Him What I Said!* (1997) takes place soon after the October Revolution when the rich men's power was declining, but, being conveniently away from the center in the Kyrgyz countryside, many people carried on in their old ways. Kuyruchuk is visiting a rich childless Kyrgyz, who, having offered him hospitality, complains that he will die heirless. Kuyruchuk predicts the birth of several children, and in his blessing he wishes that his children may have a good life and avoid their father's fate. The story is concluded by the fact that Kuyruchuk's prophecy comes true: owing to the vicissitudes of history, the Kyrgyz loses all his wealth, is imprisoned, and dies in poverty, while his children live in safety and health.

A number of stories take place when Kuyruchuk was at the height of his fame: an adult man, his talents and commitment to justice were known in many regions and he was respected as a famous *Manas* singer. This period in his life coincided with the early years of the Soviet Union. *Had I Become Younger?* (1964) is dated with more than usual precision to the year of 1921, at the time when “the Soviet Union was young and its officials inexperienced.” During his stay in Pishpek, Kuyruchuk is summoned by the authorities: they are awaiting a high-ranking guest from Almaty, and Kuyruchuk is expected to entertain the visitor. He watches the preparations for the visit with contempt; upon confronting the guest, Kuyruchuk, who as usual is dressed in tatty old clothes, asks him: “Have I become younger?” Since the addressee does not understand the question, Kuyruchuk has to explain that the elaborate preparations in anticipation of the Soviet official’s visit to the white yurt, the ceremonial meal, and expensive gifts remind him of the reception of rich patrons in pre-Soviet, “feudal” times, which is not at all compatible with Soviet morality. The official admits that Kuyruchuk is right and “after this the reception of visiting Soviet leaders has become much simpler.”

Some stories deal with the difficulties of collectivization, in which Kuyruchuk is occasionally confronted with representatives of the old ruling classes, who insist on continuing with exploitation and accumulation for private profit and refuse to join the collective. In *Fill the Holes* (1964) the villain is Karımbay the speculator, who buys up grain from the peasants cheaply soon after the harvest and stores it in holes in his yard in order to sell it in the spring when prices are high. He is introduced as an unashamed representative of the market principle; he publicly boasts that he can even buy happiness in the bazaar. Kuyruchuk pays him a visit, turning down his hospitality as well as his offer of a gift, thus effectively denying him community membership. Instead, he reproaches him with sharp, mocking words for not entering the *kolkhoz* and thus alienating himself from the rest of the people.

White Kulak, Black Kulak, All the Same Kulak! (1964) takes place during the early years of collectivization. A Soviet official arrives in Kuyruchuk’s village to explain to people the significance of joining the *kolkhoz*. People are registering one after the other, among them members of the former ruling classes, who, trying to disguise their “bad class origins,” pretend to be poor and turn up clad in tatters. Kuyruchuk’s passivity attracts attention. Making a pun on the color symbolism of the dominant ideology, which prohibited the “white kulaks” from joining, he points out that as long as a number of kulaks clad in borrowed rags (the “black kulaks”) are entering the *kolkhoz* he would refuse to join. His words again have the desired effect; the names of these kulaks are deleted from the list.

Omor, the Evil Magician (1964) is also set in the early years of collectivization, sometime during the 1930s. Omor, a poor man by birth, is given a mill by a rich person who is anxious to show his good intentions in acting according to socialist ideals. Omor, however, abuses his newly acquired wealth: not only does he refuse to enter the *kolkhoz*, but he also starts accumulating wealth through speculation, exploiting others and behaving like any feudal landlord in presocialist times. Kuyruchuk pays him a well-orchestrated visit, having arranged that all villagers gather at the mill. He then asks the miller to grind his grain, but in fact his sacks have been filled with sand instead of wheat. When Omor points out that Kuyruchuk’s sacks contain only sand, Kuyruchuk accuses him of being an evil magician who has turned his wheat into sand. Moreover, pointing at the miller’s flock he accuses him of having acquired his wealth at the

expense of the poor, orphans, and widows. The story ends in Omor's total social isolation and the news that the *kolkhoz* soon builds its own mill, thus putting an end to the villagers' dependence on Omor's services.

I Shall Take Neither 99, Nor 101 (1964) is set soon after the *kolkhoz* had been established, and criticizes the old mentality that privileged private over collective property. Kuyruchuk is again on the road, visiting his friend who has been made chairman of the local Soviet. Kuyruchuk notices the difference between collectively owned cattle that are neglected and starved, and cattle in private ownership that look fat and well looked-after. Since at dinner everyone expects him to come up with witty stories, he displays a cow horn that he has broken off the skull of a dead animal, asking the other guests if this horn needed hay. The assembled people still expect a joke and reply positively, promising upon Kuyruchuk's request to deliver a hundred stacks each the following day. Since he is guest of honor, he is offered the head of a sheep, and he amuses people by pretending to listen to it. In reply to the inevitable question as to what he heard, he reveals that the sheep slaughtered for the feast used to belong to the collective, because the chairman did not want to sacrifice any of his own sheep for his guests. On the following day, as the promised haystacks are being delivered, Kuyruchuk explains that this hay is not for him, but is needed for the cattle in collective ownership. He admonishes the members of the *kolkhoz* to take good care of the collective's livestock, and not to indulge in drinking too much vodka.

The selected stories above all focus on the problems encountered by people on the local level in the wake of Soviet social engineering in the early years of collectivization. Our small sample highlights the low level of political commitment to socialist principles. While continuities between the presocialist and early socialist era are generally emphasized, only the stories published in 1997 go so far in their critique as to address the issue of individual tragedies, including impoverishment and imprisonment of "bad class elements."²⁸

Religion

In the last story mentioned above, Kuyruchuk's information concerning the state of affairs is based on his personal observations, but his knowledge of where the sacrificial sheep came from may have stemmed from his supernatural ability to see things that are invisible to human eyes. We have already mentioned his talent to get people to give him what he asks for without using persuasion or force. His unusual gift is more explicitly foregrounded in post-Independence publications, in which Kuyruchuk seems to have (re)gained his spiritual, almost saintly qualities. Relying on his supernatural insight, in *Shame on You, Mergen* (1997) he reveals Mergen to be the thief of an old woman's sheep, and obliges him to compensate her. In *What Jumash!* (1997) Kuyruchuk lives up to his fame as a seer, and makes a prophecy to a man that his wife will bear him a son. He gets the man's promise to call him when the child is born, so that he can name him. Out of respect, the man names his son Kuyruchuk even before the latter arrives. Because his wish has not been respected, Kuyruchuk punishes the family by making a

²⁸ Cf. also the story titled *Three Times You Will Go to Hell* (1997), mentioned below.

prophecy that the child bearing his name will grow up lacking an organ. His words, of course, come true.

Kuyruchuk, like the Trickster, has a prophetic insight into the “hidden design of things” (Hyde 1998:283-312) that is revealed again and again, in stories taking place both under Czarist rule and in the Soviet era.²⁹ These could relate to predicting major historical events, suffering, or changes in the family, especially the birth of a child. In *Kuyruchuk's Predictions* (1964), while visiting a particular village he predicts that a major cataclysm is to take place there. Retrospectively, people understand it as being the prophecy of the Great Patriotic War, which caused starvation and epidemics and decimated the population of this particular village.

In *Three Times You Will Go to Hell* (1997), Sheraldī, the chairman of a collective farm, wants to celebrate his appointment in time-honored Kyrgyz fashion by asking for the village elders' blessing and sacrificing a mare. Kuyruchuk happens to arrive in the midst of the celebrations. He praises Sheraldī for honoring Kyrgyz traditions, but admonishes him for sacrificing a mare on *kolkhoz* property rather than his own, and as punishment he prophesies that Sheraldī will go to hell three times. The prediction comes true, since Sheraldī is imprisoned three times in his life. Kuyruchuk's connection to the unspecified supernatural, and especially his ability to predict, are again familiar from the Trickster corpus: the Yoruba, the Fon, and the Dogon see their Trickster God as the “chief possessor of divination's language” (Pelton 1987:47).

In some stories Kuyruchuk appears as soon as people talk or even think about him. In *Kuyruchuk's Predictions*, a recently appointed judge doubts Kuyruchuk's special powers: Kuyruchuk appears almost immediately and asks for a precise sum from him, which is exactly the amount the judge happens to have in his pocket. Upon Kuyruchuk's request, he feels compelled to hand over the money. The story of *Kuyruchuk and the Judge* (1997) builds on the same element: he correctly guesses the amount of money the judge has in his wallet and asks him to give it to him. He then presents the money to the poorest-looking boy in the crowd.

In *The Son Will Be a Smith* (1997), Kuyruchuk predicts that the smith's small child will continue his father's profession, and blesses him. It is attributed to the power of his blessing that the prediction comes true. As the young child becomes a grown up and hears that Kuyruchuk is in the vicinity, he goes to see him and, before introducing himself, Kuyruchuk miraculously recognizes in the adult the small child he blessed many years before. The act of blessing certainly adds a supernatural quality to his character, but an even more obvious connection between Kuyruchuk and the supernatural is made in *Janake's Story* (1997). Upon approaching a saintly shrine, Janake starts thinking of Kuyruchuk and his ability to get whatever he wants from people. Minutes later he meets none other than Kuyruchuk, who asks for the money that he happens to have on him. Janake obeys, without comprehending how it happened, concluding that Kuyruchuk must have supernatural powers and a guardian angel.

The spirit is in fact spotted by Kuyruchuk's son in *The Guardian Angel* (1997). In his recollections, he remembers how the children were forbidden to disturb their father while he was reciting his prayers, and if they happened to come in they were under strict instructions to wait

²⁹ This is particularly emphasized in post-Independence publications (Öskönali uulu 1997:46; Kenchiev and Abdīrazakov 2002:35).

quietly but without falling asleep. The small son once entered the room where his father was praying and sat down quietly. Next to him was a naked baby with a long beard, none other than Kuyruchuk's guardian angel. However, the boy fell asleep while waiting, and upon waking up his father admonished him and told him that he had lost the opportunity to become a second Kuyruchuk, and he was doomed to live an ordinary life. The possibility that his son could, on condition, inherit his supernatural powers, is also compatible with Central Asian beliefs in inherited charisma.

The religious, praying Kuyruchuk is mentioned in the postsocialist Kyrgyz editions. According to *My Road Leads Me Far Away From Here, I Won't Come Back* (1997), Kuyruchuk predicts his own death, saying his farewells to his relatives, neighbors, and friends on his final day before returning home to pray. He dies while praying, the utmost grace that can befall a Muslim. We have mentioned that practically all Trickster figures have a religious dimension, and in this respect Kuyruchuk conforms completely to the pattern. Although most obviously elaborated in stories published after independence, this element was not entirely purged from the Sovietized publications, which emphasized his abilities as a seer (Kenchiev and Abdīrazakov 2002:35; Öskönalī uulu 1997:46). In agreement with the dominant ideology, the Soviet publication represents religion as a conservative and ultimately destructive force and plays down Kuyruchuk's supernatural side; in contrast, post-Independence tales often foreground his personal religiosity and his innate supernatural abilities, thus reflecting current state attitudes toward non-political religious expressions.

The Kuyruchuk Cycle and Central Asian Oral Tradition

In line with the major political events of the twentieth century, it is possible to pinpoint several phases in the history of Central Asian oral tradition as well as fluctuations in official Soviet attitude toward it. In the beginning of the twentieth century, oral tradition was a vehicle of social and national protests against unpopular Russian politics. In the traditional genres, the new bards of the anti-Russian movement—were celebrated as heroes (*batır*)—in other words, the Kazakh and Kyrgyz bards, the *akin*, came forward as active propagators of resistance. This may have been one of the reasons why in the 1920s, the recitation of epics was either completely forbidden or allowed only with considerably altered contents. These measures were no doubt also motivated by the fear that the glorification of the past, a typical characteristic of the epics, could strengthen people's nostalgia for the previous era. In the 1930s, the repressions were relaxed somewhat, most likely due to Maxim Gorki's famous speech held at the First Congress of Soviet Authors in 1934, in which he emphasized the importance of oral tradition research. This intervention opened up the way towards lively research activities that continued until World War II.³⁰ It was probably during this period that the first Kuyruchuk stories were collected and published (*Kirgizskie pioneri*, 1938).

World War II was followed by a new phase of intolerance towards oral tradition, during which the idealization of the feudal legacy, the nationalist undertones, and the neglect of social

³⁰This brief overview is based on Winner 1958:150-52.

conflicts and class struggle were particularly attacked and criticized (1947-50). In 1951 the campaign against the epics intensified in the Turkic-speaking republics, and in Kyrgyzstan it ended in a compromise. Thanks to the resistance of the intelligentsia, research into oral tradition could continue. In the 1960s and 1970s the restrictions were further relaxed, and it is no accident that most of the Kuyruchuk stories were published during this time. Parallel to researching traditional oral transmissions, a new category of the oral narrative tradition emerged in Soviet Central Asia that did not bear the hallmarks of oral tradition (spontaneity and anonymity) and primarily served the purpose of political propaganda. Nevertheless, it represented a transition from conventional genres to new Soviet folklore, and the two were inextricably entangled. The bards who composed these new songs and narratives were well-versed in the pre-Soviet oral tradition, enabling them to continue to fulfill their traditional tasks such as disseminating and commenting news, while spreading Soviet political propaganda. Although many Kyrgyz and Kazakh bards were inspired by Soviet ideology or were even directly in the service of the Soviet power holders, it is significant that, in line with Stalin's famous saying "national in form, socialist in content," they continued their work within the parameters of conventional forms and genres (Winner 1958:156).

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the epics started to be mobilized in the service of national historiography, which in the new independent republics has been characterized by the glorification of an idealized national past. In 1991 the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, which had already been recognized as national treasure during Soviet times, was elevated to become the symbol of national unity. The *Manas*, which the former President Akaev praised as a collection of traditional values, is considered by this national ideology to have the capacity to guarantee the consolidation of the peoples and ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan in a sovereign and democratic country. In addition, the epic is supposed to assist in the moral education of young people, the "re-Kyrgyzization" of the Kyrgyz, as well as the solving of the most urgent problems of the country, such as economic crises, corruption, the legacy of tribal mentality, nepotism, and alcohol and drug abuse (Straube 2007:134; Prior 2000).³¹

It was this changing political context that shaped the Kuyruchuk corpus as we know it today. In the Soviet era the stories were reduced to children's tales, a genre that nonetheless allowed for the propagation of a certain contained form of nationalism.³² More recent post-Independence publications, on the other hand, try to promote Kuyruchuk as a full-fledged national hero, albeit not quite on a par with the mythical Kyrgyz hero, *Manas*.

Scholarly emphasis on oral tradition *as performance* implies that, once printed, the texts no longer display the communicative intentions of the narrator, which in the printed version are bound to become obscured by ideological distortions of one sort or another. In this essay, such assumptions have been reviewed. On the strength of the evidence of the Kuyruchuk tales, we argue that texts that have been transferred from the oral to the printed realm should not be dismissed as entirely meaningless because they have been decontextualized, but rather reassessed as recontextualized narratives. In a seminal article, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs make

³¹ There are numerous publications concerning the epic; see, for example, *Manas* 1968; Hatto 1990.

³² The consequence is that the Kuyruchuk stories, like many Trickster tales elsewhere, have been mobilized to aid the socialization of young people.

the important point that researchers have strongly argued for the contextualization of verbal art on the grounds that “verbal art forms are so susceptible to treatment as self-contained, bounded objects separable from their social and cultural contexts of production and reproduction” (1990:72). These authors then propose to shift the emphasis from contextualization to decontextualization, and to work with the concept of entextualization. Based on a distinction between discourse and text, entextualization is defined as “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable” (73).

Due to this entextualization and subsequent decontextualization of the Kuyruchuk stories that were then repeatedly recontextualized first in the Soviet, then in the post-Independence era, the story of the stories is told by the texts themselves. In her article on meta-dimensions in folk narratives, Barbara Babcock points to externally marked meta-narrational devices as well as to implicit forms of narrative self-referencing (1984:71-72). In reference to implicit meta-narrativity she states that “perhaps no form of narrative does this so fully as the ubiquitous trickster tale” (73). This is no place to elaborate on all the meta-narrative devices deployed in the Kuyruchuk stories, which range from the narrator explicitly drawing attention to the fact that he is telling a story to the many references to Kuyruchuk’s eloquence and talent as a singer of the *Manas*. Let it suffice here to point out that many if not all the stories introduced here bear witness to their repeated recontextualization. The implications are that we potentially have to do with an example of repeated meta-folklorization orchestrated or inspired by the state, rather than by individual performers.

Conclusion

The Trickster appears in many parts of the world in myths and folktales as well as in literary works. Kuyruchuk is a historic folk Trickster rather than a legendary, mythological “culture hero.” In the published stories, the Kuyruchuk of Czarist times behaves like a man of the people whose strong sense of social justice manifests itself already in his youth in the wake of the Russian conquest of Kyrgyz tribal territories. His later efforts to reallocate resources coincide with the eve of the October Revolution. During Russian rule he applies those principles of reallocation that will provide the dominant ideology in the coming era, which itself testifies to his powers of prediction. But he would not be a Trickster if in the new social order he merely saw the realization of his predictions: this enemy of boundaries once again spots the continuities between the old and new systems, and appears as a social critic of these continuities, bringing more confusion and chaos into the recently established and very fragile social order.

Questioning, criticizing, or subverting the dominant social order is one of Kuyruchuk’s most striking characteristics. In the tales taking place in Czarist times, he attacks the dominant ideology, while in the Soviet era it is the methods of applying the principles of fair redistribution that he questions and criticizes. In both cases he does this by breaking taboos: in the presocialist tales he mocks power holders and representatives of the higher echelons of religious and secular hierarchies, and challenges central Kyrgyz values such as death rituals, the veneration of the

dead, and hospitality, while simultaneously subscribing to these same values. In the Soviet period, he breaks the taboos of the new social order and ridicules both the excesses of Soviet officials and the ignorance of villagers and their leaders who fail to appreciate the value of collective property. In both eras he consistently remains highly ambivalent. Breaking taboos, outraging, and humiliating, but at the same time bringing something good to his community through pointing out both the pitfalls as well as the benefits of some patterns of behavior—these Trickster characteristics also fit Kuyruchuk.

We have seen how the primary features of the Trickster include his interest in food, sex and money, and his often exaggerated selfishness. Kuyruchuk definitely displays these characteristics, although explicit sexuality is missing from the selected tales, which may well be due to the strong sexual taboos informing censorship. However, implicit sexuality and scatology do play a certain part in the published stories. Inasmuch as Kuyruchuk plays with corpses and with the concept of pollution, his stories conform to Trickster tales as narrative dirt-rituals, in which the character playing with dirt brings about change (Hyde 1998:153-99).

Kuyruchuk's interest in money is somewhat different from that of the archetypal Trickster, because he sets himself limits; he usually shares what he gets or gives it away altogether, and when we are not actually told that this happens we may at least assume that it does. Since he mobilizes his supernatural ability to take what he wants and people appear to give to him willingly, and since he never uses force, it seems that his getting what he desires obscures once again the boundary between gift and theft, and by extension between clean and dirty, what is socially permitted and what is not. While in some stories he does have a specific aim, in others the performance of a prank and the ensuing laughter are the end itself, a characteristic that Kuyruchuk also shares with other such figures (Williams 2000:143). Although not a mythical culture hero, he liberates the Kyrgyz from the blood-sucking Uzbek money-lenders, frees others from oppressive patrons, changes the ways of new Soviet officials, influences recruitment principles into the collective, and reflects notions of collective and private ownership.

Soviet nationality policies recognized minority rights and promoted ethnic self-expression while simultaneously keeping them under control, a tendency aptly demonstrated by the Kuyruchuk stories. The stories in the Soviet and post-Independence publications must have been carefully selected and edited, and perhaps also manipulated in other ways, so that they give support to the dominant ideologies. We have argued that while deliberate state strategies are often blatantly recognizable (e.g., attitudes toward religion), at other times some published texts are presented as ideologically unmarked, while yet others point to certain ambiguities lurking behind explicit state discourses (e.g., attitudes toward the free market or inter-ethnic relations). In the area of religion, a major ideological shift between the two eras is discernible. In promoting Kyrgyzness, a shift of emphasis seems to have taken place: centering and de-centering play a part in the complicated processes of endowing texts with authority (Bauman and Briggs 1990:77). In spite of their apparent simplicity, the stories do allow for expressing inherent tension and ambiguities; for example, the need for social justice remains a constant even in the post-Independence publications, which, if they were consistent with current state ideology, should unequivocally promote the principles of the free market. Similarly, in the 1964 collection a number of stories comment critically on the early years of collectivization. While these stories consistently extol the virtues of socialist principles, they also serve as a projection screen for a

measure of self-reflexivity and self-criticism on the side of the Soviet power holders, rather than as simple reflections of the dominant ideology.

The Kyrgyz Trickster has no doubt been “tamed,” domesticated and reshaped by both Soviet and postsocialist ideology. It is also possible that at times other tales and anecdotes have infiltrated the Kuyruchuk corpus.³³ Yet in spite of these manipulations, Kuyruchuk has retained his basic Trickster characteristics, including his propensity to imitate, his eloquence, and his deep ambiguity.

At the beginning of this essay we suggested that fixing a corpus of oral traditions in print and subjecting it to ideological distortions should not necessarily be viewed negatively as decontextualization, but rather positively in terms of strategic recontextualization. Of course, we can no longer analyze the texts as performance if performances cease, but this process should not necessarily be seen as a loss of authenticity. Franz Boas has shown how some tales may be “the property of social groups possessing definite privileges” (1996:453). More explicitly, Edmund Leach claims that there is no “authentic” or “correct” version of Kachin tales that would be acceptable to all Kachins; instead, existing versions reveal competing status claims (2001:266-78). Raymond Firth explicitly considers the relationship between Tikopian oral tradition and social status, and suggests that tales reflect social conflict and competition rather than harmony and unity; variations may reveal the perspectives of different interest groups (1961:175). The context of storytelling always influences the interpretation. Once we accept that traditional tales are also told with some political or didactic intent (or both), it follows that the printed versions of the Kuyruchuk stories are also best seen as variations in which the novel elements of ideological bias represent the interests of the new power-holders. The interpretation of such stories remains as context-dependent as that of the orally transmitted tales. Given that no single “authentic” version can be recovered, we have postulated that all the stories have retained some of their authenticity as orally transmitted tradition. Since we do not have access to any versions untouched by state ideology, we have resorted to a simple content analysis, which has revealed enough structural consistencies with comparable features of other oral traditions for us to claim that the stories have not been completely uprooted from their cultural milieu. They are better regarded as competing varieties rather than distortions of an assumed authentic original.

Thus the stories reveal much about the interface between the oral and written domains, about state strategies, but also about cultural persistence in face of great social transformations that is discernible through the unintended perseverance of the characteristic features of the Trickster genre. The Kuyruchuk stories exemplify the social life of discourse, as it is repeatedly decontextualized only to be recontextualized as part of the diverse ideological strategies of massive state projects. The repeated decontextualization and recontextualization of the text corpus may turn out to generate inaccurate or partial expressions of deliberate state strategies, but accurate reflections of the ambiguities of everyday life, especially at times of accelerated social transformation. Nevertheless, they leave little room for doubting the efforts of the state to influence cultural production and to appropriate selected, entextualized parts of folk discourse through processes of meta-folklorization.

³³ We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this possibility.

Finally, the fate of this figure, pushed to the margins of oral tradition studies, demonstrates within the Central Asian context once again that the 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 and even legitimating new ideologies.

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APPENDIX

1. I Am Kuyruchuk

Once upon a time there lived a *bay* called Shaake. His nickname was Kelemish, which means “rat.” People were not sure what was more important to him: his wealth or his conceited malice, more likely the latter.

Shaake enjoyed inviting travelers to his yurt, pretending to be a good host while making fun of his guest. A traveler would dismount from his horse without suspecting anything and Shaake would invite him into his yurt. The host would offer his guest the seat of honor and engage in polite conversation with him. Then, his servants would bring a large cup of sour milk mixed with ashes for the guest while the *bay*’s men guarded the entrance. There was no way out of this situation. The unfortunate traveler would feel sick and choke on the milk, but would still have to drink it.

But one day, Shaake fell into his own trap. His men brought along a poorly dressed traveler. As Shaake received his guest, he could hardly wait to make fun of him. The unfortunate traveler entered the yurt suspecting nothing, and sat down in the appointed place. The *bay* gave orders to serve the special guest with refreshments that had been prepared for him. A stinking cup was produced. But, to everyone’s surprise, the guest drank everything without batting an eyelid. A little disappointed, the *bay* ordered that another cup should be brought. The strange guest drained the second cup. Shaake was dumb-struck because usually all his guests would be making faces and spitting . . . some of them would even swear under their breath. Shaake ordered that a third cup should be filled, but his guest pushed it aside, thanking him politely:

—Thanks, I am full.

Shaake frowned. The expected entertainment did not take place. He ordered his wife to fill two cups. Having drunk a little, he thought: “This scoundrel won’t dare to refuse.”

But again nothing interesting happened. When Shaake started sipping, the guest did the same; as soon as Shaake stopped, the guest also put down his cup. Moreover, the guest imitated all the host’s gestures and grimaces. He did it so well that the others present started to chuckle. This only made Shaake angrier. He had made a fool of himself, and his pride could not take it. He had to make a laughing stock of this stinking scoundrel, at any price.

After thinking a little, Shaake suggested:

—Let’s go on all fours and lap like dogs!

—All right!

The traveler went on all fours.

The *bay* pointed at him, roaring with laughter.

—Look! Look! He is a dog! He has turned into a dog.

The guest was not embarrassed at all. He looked around before he answered, smiling:

—Well, a strong dog has more dignity than a stinking rat with a bare tail.

The guests started laughing. The host turned purple with rage and jumped up like a young goat.

—Who are you to mock me?

—I am Kuyruchuk.

2. Kuyruchuk’s Predictions

One day some people were gathered in the village pub drinking beer. They were speaking about Kuyruchuk. One of them was Baykorin—he had recently come to Jungal and had been appointed judge of the Chuy region. He said:

—Hey, Jungal people, stop it! You boast of your Kalik and Kuyruchuk all the time! Well, Kalik might be an accomplished singer, but Kuyruchuk . . . I don’t believe that his predictions always come true. I wish he were here so that he could demonstrate his miracles! At this moment the door opened and Kuyruchuk appeared at the threshold as if he had been eavesdropping. He looked right into the judge’s eyes and ordered:

—Give me the forty *soms* that you have in your pocket!

Those present jumped up in surprise. The judge took out the forty *soms* with shaking hands and gave them to Kuyruchuk. Kuyruchuk gave twenty *soms* to those present, and the other twenty to the travelers.

—You should keep your eyes open! You will be a judge for many years. —Kuyruchuk said and went out.

—Well, you wanted to meet Kuyruchuk.—people told the judge.

—Was it Kuyruchuk?

—Yes, that man was Kuyruchuk whom you wished to see.

First he assumed the appearance of a dragon, and then I saw him as a man, said the judge. They say that sometimes Kuyruchuk took the appearance of a golden eagle, a tiger, or a wolf.

The elder Mamatemir recalled.

“I was headmaster at the time. One day I was watering the millet in the field along the main road. It was getting dark. Suddenly a horseman stopped nearby and asked:

—Is your name Mamatemir?

Recognizing Kuyruchuk’s voice, I came up to the edge of the field and greeted him. He shook my hand and asked cunningly:

Will you slaughter a lamb?

—What lamb? But . . . —I was at a loss.

—I see you have no idea, let’s go home then.

When we came up to the house we actually saw a black lamb tied by the tree. My father Sulayman was a mullah, he could cure illnesses by casting a spell. It turned out that the lamb was left by a man whose child was a sleepwalker.

—That’s all right. —Kuyruchuk said —the child will recover.

The lamb was slaughtered. While the meat was being cooked, we went outside to have a talk. Suddenly, Kuyruchuk fell silent and said after a while:

—Mamatemir, this place used to have another name: Oy-Tal. Little by little this name was forgotten, and now it is called Kok-Oy. The soil here is at a level lower than before. Some cataclysm is sure to take place . . .

Having said these words, he fell silent again. I was surprised, but didn’t bother him with questions because he wouldn’t have liked it. That day he stayed at our place and in the morning he left us and continued his trip.

Soon, the Great Patriotic War broke out. The people of Oy-Tal joined the war to defend their country. At that time, people were close to starvation, and illness killed many. From the one hundred and twenty houses in the village, ninety people died. Those left alive received telegrams notifying them of their relatives’ death. This grief entered many Jungal houses. Kuyruchuk’s prediction had come true.

3. Kuyruchuk’s Childhood

In his infancy, Kuyruchuk was ill with rickets; as the illness got worse, it paralyzed his legs. Whenever his mother had to leave him somewhere, she swaddled him in a cradle specially designed for the sick child. Once, at the time of an Islamic holiday when his mother was away visiting, a group of cheerful girls came from the neighboring village and crowded into the house. There was nobody at home. But, complying with custom, the visitors uttered the formula: “Happy holidays!”

—There is nobody at home, remarked one of them.

At this point Kuyruchuk lifted his head in the cradle and said in the manner of an adult:

—Happy holidays!

The merry girls were stupefied for a moment, and then rushed out of the house screaming. No wonder that they got a fright, hearing a baby speak like an adult!

When Kuyruchuk reached the age of seven, his parents resorted to a time-honored cure to make their child walk. They took him to the steppe and left him there; then they drove horses on him. Seeing the horses running directly towards him, he was frightened, jumped to his feet, and began to run. He was unable to stay on his feet and soon fell. Then he began to walk with the help of a stick and after three months he managed without a stick. When he was seven years old he made the whole village laugh with the following song:

Remember, once and for all,
My legs were unable to walk for six years.
Having nicknamed me a “sitter,”
Father left me in the steppe.
Alimbay’s stallions

Almost trampled me
And then my poor legs
Began running.

And, whoever asked him, he always sang this song obligingly:

At the age of nine, Kудaybergen lost his mother.
His sobbing touched everyone:
I was looking for you everywhere,
Shedding tears.
With whom have you left me, mother,
Your orphan crow?
I searched and looked everywhere,
Crying.
Answer me, dear,
What is left for me now?
And with whom have you left me,
Your only joy?

4. Kuyruchuk's Adolescence

When Kuyruchuk was seventeen years old, he was ready to earn money to support himself. He went to Tokmok and got a job as a guard in a shop owned by a rich man. [This is how it happened.] He was in town for the first time and on his first day there, out of curiosity, he joined the townspeople's assembly.

—Welcome! —He was greeted.

—Would you like some tea? an Uzbek tea-vendor asked him.

—Yes —He answered, taking a seat.

The tea-vendor brought bread and tea. “What a hospitable man!”—Kuyruchuk thought. He drank his tea and was about to leave when the tea vendor seized him by his collar and shouted:

—Give me my bucket back!

—The bucket is at home. I'll go and fetch it. Just let go of my collar!—Kuyruchuk begged.

But the tea-vendor had no intention of letting him go. Then Kuyruchuk started running:

—I have no bucket. You invited me for tea and afterwards you demand a bucket from me. The bucket is full of water.

But the tea vendor got hold of him again:

—Are you making fun of me, you scoundrel?

A rich man who was watching this scene gave 10 *tüyin* to the tea vendor to help Kuyruchuk: he understood that this was the boy's first visit to town. So he took him to his home and employed him for a small wage. Kuyruchuk had to shift as much coal in one day as others would shift in three days. He took his dinner and pocketed his earnings. The rich man was pleased with his ability to work and decided to make him his servant. He entrusted his shops to him. They agreed on a payment of 2.50 *soms* a month.

At that time two cunning thieves came to town. Many people became the victims of their tricks. One day, lying in wait for them, Kuyruchuk caught the thieves red-handed as they were carrying a cauldron full of pilaf and took them to *bays*. For this reason, his payment was raised to 7 *soms*. After this incident, Kuyruchuk was allowed to work on horseback.

A month later Kuyruchuk saw a thief making a hole in the roof of the shop. He got in, filled his rubber boots with money, and threw them up to the roof. Kuyruchuk seized the boots and raised the alarm. People gathered quickly. In spite of the fact that the thief had been trapped, nobody dared to go in. Kuyruchuk had to tie him up and drag him out. For this display of heroism, his wages were raised to 15 *soms*.

In the course of time he got himself good clothes, bought a horse, and began to live prosperously. But soon his father Omurzak came to Tokmok and took Kuyruchuk away to Jumgal. When he returned, the *manap* Kokumbay took his only mare as compensation. Using his earnings, Kuyruchuk got married and settled down to domestic life. He became a swarthy, strong, and muscular man who could win every horse race. The piercing look of his deep-seated eyes resembled the eyes of an eagle, and he assumed an important appearance. In short, Kuyruchuk was transformed into an energetic man with severe looks.

5. Supotay's Spirit

This is one of the tricks little Kuyruchuk played. He was always hungry; he never had enough to eat. He survived on the donations of charitable women. It must be added that sometimes he stole a piece of meat or some flat cake from old women. One is capable of many things because of hunger!

One day, wandering about the village, Kuyruchuk found himself at the rich Supotay's tent. Its owner had died the year before and his relatives were getting ready for the first anniversary repast. Kuyruchuk became excited by the good smells: women were cooking meat, and large amounts of meat and fat were boiling in enormous pots. The tasty red *borsooks* were sizzling in copper pans. The boy could not take his eyes off this abundance. He was not the only one mesmerized [by the sight of cooking food]: all the village children gathered around the yurt and the ovens. But they waited in vain: Supotay's wife was sharp-sighted and not a single piece of *borsook* or meat fell into the hands of the beggar children.

Kuyruchuk didn't wait around for alms; instead, he gave the women a hand. He helped to bake the pastry; he helped to wash the offal; he poured water upon the cooks' hands. He ran about all day and received two *borsooks* that had fallen on the ground as well as a piece of boiled lung. There was nothing he could do but be thankful for small mercies. He ate the piece of lung and gave the *borsooks* to his little brothers.

The next day the Supotay family loaded their horses with the sacrificial food and, taking the mullah with them, they went to Supotay's grave. The women wailed so loudly that they frightened away the birds and other small creatures that took refuge in the steppe. The second wife of the deceased Supotay was particularly zealous. (The first wife had already died.) Others tried to calm her, begging her to stop wailing—all in vain. She cried even more loudly. One of the old women noted disapprovingly:

—A truly devoted wife does not behave like this.

Having heard this remark, the widow started scratching her face and shouted with all her might:

—Oh, Supotay! Take me away with you! It would be better for me to die than to hear such words! Give me a knife!

Having seen that it was useless to calm her, the relatives of the deceased spread the ceremonial tablecloth, and placed the meat and the *borsooks* by the grave.

The widow continued to wail:

—Oh, my hero! How could you leave me? Oh my darling, take me to the grave! Take me!

All of a sudden an angry voice was heard from the grave:

—Stop this! I know you very well! No sooner did you bury me than the herdsman Shukura was in our yurt! —The widow and the people around the tablecloth stood dumbstruck, they were frightened and their mouths dropped open in amazement.

But the terrible voice spoke again:

—Hey, why are you standing around so still? It is too late to mourn for me! I suffered a whole year because of you. Why have you come? Clear off!

People were convinced that what they heard was Supotay's voice, irate and impatient. Some of those who were the most scared took to their heels, while others started to saddle their horses. The mullah began muttering prayers.

The echo of the choked voice could still be heard over the graveyard when Supotay's relatives fled. Who was it who spoke? Supotay, or the devil himself? No! Kuyruchuk came out from the neighboring grave. Seeing the empty graveyard and the heaps of meat and *borsook* left there, he whistled with pleasure. His trick had proven to be a success. Now it was only a matter of sharing the food with the other children. [After all] Supotay had had a good life, so there was no reason to take offense.

6. "I Am Dead Now . . ."

Once there was a poor man who had many children. Three misfortunes settled on his house: hunger, cold, and a bad-tempered, untidy wife. The poor man summed up his life in the following song:

Barley broth is without salt
 Poverty and hunger used to
 Torment us two,
 Then they were tormenting us four.
 My bad-tempered wife and a crowd of children
 They are now tormenting us six.

Kuyruchuk wanted to help the unhappy man, but, since he had made no profit from his cattle, he was not able to.

But if you yourself are not happy, how can you help another unhappy person? Once a rich and influential *bay*

came from Aq-Tal and settled down not far from Son-Kul. Later he set out for Mecca and died on the way. His sad (and perhaps not so sad) relatives organized a splendid funeral feast for him.

Rich and poor came invited and uninvited to attend the feast. Kuyruchuk joined the communal meal in the company of the poor man. Most people were delighted at the sight of the famous jester, but the rich resented his presence. The son of the deceased collected some cattle from the villagers to display them as a prize for the winner of the race.

Following the race it was time for wrestling. Kuyruchuk's poor friend was a strong and healthy man, although he was not a famous champion wrestler. Sly Kuyruchuk decided that he should fight. But, seeing the ragged fellow, the participants only laughed at him. Suddenly Kuyruchuk announced that he himself would take part in the wrestling, and asked for the people's blessing The people around made encouraging noises as they recalled his encounter with the Kazakh champion and his victory over him. The elders recited a prayer. The only thing left to do was to find an opponent. It was the strong Mambet who was to fight Kuyruchuk. He was stretching out his hands to greet the audience as the sly Kuyruchuk, ready with a plan, calmly asked:

—How many children do you have?

—I have seven children.

—Ah, so many! So then I must let you have the prize.

[Indeed, Mambet won the fight.] Mambet's relatives were thrilled with delight and carried the winner off the field Kuyruchuk continued to lie on the ground. At first nobody paid attention to him, but time passed and he lay motionless in the middle the field. Some people approached him and said:

—Stand up, Kuyruchuk!

—Why are you still lying down? —asked others.

Kuyruchuk only whispered:

—I am dying.

The rumor about Kuyruchuk's approaching death passed from mouth to mouth. People got excited. Crowds of people gathered around him in the twinkle of an eye, full of sorrow and indignation.

At this moment the anxious Mambet made his way to Kuyruchuk, holding the reins of the horse that was the winner's prize. Bowing, he asked with alarm:

—What happened to you, Kuke?! Stand up, please, and take this modest prize.

—Those who had participated in many fights knew very well that maiming one's adversary, let alone killing him, could lead to court dispute. In such situations the injurer is ready to give away his house and his last shirt. Kuyruchuk knew this well, but he did not want to harm innocent people. Without opening his eyes he whispered quickly:

—You may keep the horse. But what did you get apart from the horse?

—Nothing. The other animals that I was to have as prizes have been confiscated by the respectable *bay*'s son and his men

—Oh, in this case tell him that I have just died. I was killed on his land. He should pay compensation for my death.

The young *bay* heard the news quickly enough. Although not very clever himself, he realized how people would take revenge on him for the offense he had inflicted on Kuyruchuk. He decided to do his duty at once and went up to Kuyruchuk. Hearing the hurried steps, the "dead man" opened one eye and groaned:

—Why did you take away the animals to be given to the winner as a prize? —whispered the sly trickster. As the young *bay* bowed his head, he continued. —Give Mambet everything back at once, down to the last lamb. You must also give me a lamb in compensation for maiming me. Otherwise I shall sing your praises that you will not be pleased to hear. Also, you had better remember your father. Do you know why the deceased used to prefer to ride a donkey rather than a good horse as befits a respectable *bay*?

The son went pale and he fell on his knees in fear:

—You do not need to do this, dear Kuke, keep silence, I beg you! I shall do everything you want.

He gave orders and all the animals were returned to the winner at once and three fat lambs were given to Kuyruchuk.

—This is my honorable Kuke, —said the young *bay* in an ingratiating voice. —I am only asking you to say a good word about my father.

Kuyruchuk jumped up like a young goat and, shaking the dust off, he turned to the people:

—The deceased was not a bad man, but he liked to ride on a hee-haw.

He bellowed, imitating the donkey! The loud laughter that followed made the top of the mountains shake.

7. The Disgraced *Jigit*

Once, while traveling around, Kuyruchuk spent the night in a yurt on the edge of a village. There lived an old man and an old woman and they were trying to light a fire in the hearth. Kuyruchuk greeted them and the hosts sat

him in the place of honor.

The old man continued with the fire. His eyes filled with tears because of the smoke. Kuyruchuk was about to help when a well-dressed young woman came in. She wore white headgear, which marked her married status, and an expensive satin dress; her arms and hands were decorated with numerous rings and bracelets. The woman did not even greet Kuyruchuk but knitted her eyebrows angrily and began to make tea. Her mother-in-law asked her to cook some meat for the guest, upon which the young woman gave her a sulky look.

Suddenly the door-curtain moved and a well-built and smartly dressed young man, the son of a *bay*, entered. He gave a nod to the old people, then sat down and started staring at the young woman. The woman brightened up: in no time she made tea, spread the table-cloth, served *borsooks*, cream, butter, and sugar. "Something is wrong here," Kuyruchuk thought, watching them.

Using sign language, the young man asked the woman on which side her bed was going to be. The woman pointed to the *chigdan*, the side where food and dishes were stored. The *jigit* gave a nod and took his leave. Before departing he remarked in passing that he had just visited Andijan and made a good profit by selling his sheep, so that he could bring many lovely things. The *jigit* left; the young woman wanted to follow him on some pretext, but the old woman stopped her. The young woman sat down and sulked. Her mother-in-law told her to make the beds. Kuyruchuk went out and tied up his horse to the side of the yurt where the *chigdan* was inside. When he came back, he saw that the young woman had made his bed in the place of honor. Kuyruchuk asked her to move his bed to the side of the *chigdan* because his horse was there and in the night he was going to let it free to graze. But the woman refused, saying:

—Why, you'll sleep here!

—I say no! I must take care of my horse.

—You'll sleep here, I say! —the young woman whispered furiously.

—Mother, please, tell your daughter-in-law that I want to sleep at this place.

—The old woman ordered her daughter-in-law to obey the guest and the daughter-in-law had no choice but to do as she was told.

In the dead of night when everybody was fast asleep, Kuyruchuk heard a slight noise from the *chigdan*. Then someone stretched his arm through the latticework of the wall.

—Are you sleeping, honey?

—No, I have been waiting for you. —Kuyruchuk whispered, changing his voice.

With trembling hands the *jigit* reached out for Kuyruchuk's hand to give him the gifts he had bought in Andijan: some perfume, soap, and a hair-comb.

—Where are the nuts, dried apricots, and raisins? You must have given those to your wife—Cunning Kuyruchuk said in an upset voice.

—Darling, is your wife as tender as I am?

—No, sweetheart, I was in a hurry, I forgot. Next time I shall bring them. Oh, I missed you so much! Is the door open?

—That stupid guest is sleeping there.

—Then come closer to me, my dear!

The wall lattice creaked and Kuyruchuk felt the *jigit's* hand touching him. Kuyruchuk caught the hand and squeezed it.

—Oh! —The fellow cried through his clenched teeth and tried to pull away his hand but Kuyruchuk squeezed it harder. The *jigit's* arm was badly scratched by the wooden latticework. At last he cried:

—Please, let me go, my reputation is ruined! Please! I was wrong to do this!

—Shame on you! You visit other people's wives and tempt them with presents! I shall tie you up to the yurt so that everyone can see you in the morning.

—Please, forgive me! I shall never do it again. You've taught me a good lesson.

—Go away from here!

The *jigit* ran away and Kuyruchuk fell asleep. In the morning the young woman did not look him in the eye. Kuyruchuk had some tea, saddled his horse, and, having said goodbye to his hosts, he left. Not far from the village the *jigit* was waiting for him, with a guilty look on his face.

—Please forgive me and do not tell anyone about what I have done. I'm a *bay's* son and if someone hears about this, everybody will laugh at me. He offered Kuyruchuk a purse, begging him to keep his secret. Kuyruchuk smiled, pushed the purse away, and whipped his horse. No one knows who told this story first, but it became widely known.

8. Young Wife, Young Mare

One autumn, Kuyruchuk was returning to his home village carrying a lamb, and wanted to stay with *bay* Toktorbay to have a rest. But the host was not at home, he had gone out hunting. The *bay* had four wives, each one

living in a separate yurt. Kuyruchuk decided to stay with the youngest wife, Byubyuina, who was the *bay's* favorite and the most spoiled of them all.

Seeing the badly dressed rider, Byubyuina decided that he was not to be welcomed as one would receive an honored visitor, and turned her face away with contempt. This angered Kuyruchuk, but he resolutely entered the yurt and took the seat of honor. Hours passed, but the host still did not appear. Kuyruchuk became hungry, and since he was tired of sitting, he lay down. Byubyuina said,

—Why is this dirty creature lying here? What does he want from the *bay*? He'd better go away!

“The young wife seems to be very economical with food, she should be taught a lesson,” Kuyruchuk thought. A maid with some clean washing entered the yurt. The hostess looked at the clothes with disgust and started quarreling with her maid.

—I have been trying hard—said the latter timidly.

—How dare you defend yourself? —shouted Byubyuina. —I'll teach you a lesson! —and started to pull the maid's hair.

The poor maid burst into tears. At last the hostess got tired and left the yurt. This time she started a quarrel with the other servants and her co-wives.

Having abused everyone, Byubyuina returned to the yurt to have a rest. Suddenly she noticed Kuyruchuk sitting on one of her mats.

—Hey! —she called to her maid. —Take the bedding from this man, shake it out and hang it up!

But Kuyruchuk pretended not to hear her and continued to lie there with his legs stretched out. Like a she-wolf, the hostess took the bedding from him and threw it at the maid. The yurt was once again full of crying.

—Wait until the *bay* comes home! Either I shall stay in this yurt or this man! And these old hags are taking the servants' side! I'll show them! They try to compare themselves to me, we'll see And this bastard tied his lamb to my yurt. —She continued, and having gone out of the yurt, she untied the lamb and, pulling its ear, she kicked it. Kuyruchuk had no choice but to leave the yurt. He had not felt so humiliated for a long time. This woman who had got fat from idleness was mocking him. He swore not to leave before taking revenge. Fortunately the *bay* appeared at a distance, followed by his retinue. When they reached the yurt, Kuyruchuk took a stick and started beating his mare. The *bay* asked with surprise.

—Kuke, what has happened to you? What has your mare done?

—*Bay*, it is my second mare. She is so jealous; she cannot forgive me for having ridden another mare. She often kicks and bites me, sometimes she even throws me off her back, she disgraces me in front of other people. I do not know about you but I always teach her this way. She needs to be kicked and sent away if she does not respect her owner

The *bay* understood the hint. He was tired of the haughty woman's scandalous behavior. And now she had even dared to hurt Kuyruchuk The *bay* punished his wife. He ordered her hair to be cut to disgrace her and sent her back to her parents.

9. As the Call, So Is the Echo

One day Kuyruchuk happened to be caught in bad weather on a journey. It was dark already. He decided to spend the night in a village. He tethered his horse by the nearest yurt, where there was still some light. A man wrapped in a camel hair coat was sitting in the place of honor. Tea mixed with fat and flour was boiling in a pot. The man seemed to be sweating.

Kuyruchuk greeted him, but the host didn't answer. Kuyruchuk stood, expecting that the host would ask him to take a seat, but the host remained silent. With her back turned to them, the hostess was busy by the fire. Kuyruchuk got angry. Even the poorest of the poor invites the traveler to have a rest, and even if he does not have a slice of bread and a pinch of barley flour left, he would light the fire and offer him a bowl of strong tea. That is the age-old custom of hospitality. The host of that yurt was far from being poor—the ornaments and the sacks filled with food showed this.

Kuyruchuk stepped forward and sat down between the host and the hostess.

The hostess poured tea in a bowl and gave it to her husband, passing over the guest. But Kuyruchuk intercepted the bowl and began gulping the hot tea. Without raising his head the host listened to the guest, who puffed and panted as he drank his tea. Having drained the bowl, Kuyruchuk calmly returned it to the hostess. She poured some tea again and gave it to her husband. That bowl was again intercepted by the clever Kuyruchuk.

The host opened one of his eyes and, looking suspiciously at Kuyruchuk, cleared his throat without saying anything. Kuyruchuk was sipping his fragrant drink and waited with interest for further reactions. At last the host lost his patience.

—Hey! Give me some tea! —he shouted to his wife.

The woman filled the second bowl and gave it to her husband. But Kuyruchuk snatched it again and began drinking

from two bowls, taking turns.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

—How could you be such a skunk? —the host shouted.

—And you? —Kuyruchuk retorted.

—Oh my God! What a confounded man!

—And you are an insatiable glutton! You eat without stopping; you would eat your neighbors out of their fortune. Even in your sleep you would stuff yourself! I'm sure that you would not even refrain from eating the remains of a dead donkey.

—What nonsense are you talking? Why should I put up with this? Hey, *jigits*! Where are you? Seize him!

—Catch the air instead! I wanted to sing to you about Manas, but you have turned out to be a bad man. I shall go to another yurt and tell people about the honorable *bay*, about his so-called hospitality and his generosity to the cold and hungry traveler.

Kuyruchuk walked to the door.

The host peeped out from his coat and, seeing his back, he became scared.

—Can it really be Kuyruchuk? —He had heard a lot about his sharp tongue and did not want to become a laughing stock. Overcoming his arrogance, he shouted:

—Wait! Take a seat, let's have a talk. Wife, cook some meat for us!

Kuyruchuk agreed to stay. Having sat down, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that the host had pointed at the smallest piece of meat, which would not have satisfied a five year-old child. The *bay*, reluctant to offer a warm welcome to his guest, said:

—Well, if you are such a skillful Manas singer, then let's hear it!

—Would you like to hear a song about the “quarreling Manas”?

—What nonsense! What do you mean “quarreling Manas”? Manas was famous for his heroic deeds! How ignorant of you!

—Then listen, honorable *bay*! —Kuyruchuk said meekly and started his song:

Hey! Manas . . . Manas . . . Manas . . .
Manas from Talas, bogatir Manas . . .
Manas . . . Manas . . . Manas . . .

He continued to repeat these words, raising and lowering his voice. At last the host lost his patience.

—How long are you going to repeat the same thing? Are there no other words?

Kuyruchuk stopped singing, stood up, and said calmly:

—As the call is, so is the echo; as the host is, so is the song. There are as many words in my song as there are pieces of meat in your pot. Be quiet, eat your meat and get fat!

Needless to say, Kuyruchuk found shelter in another yurt for the night, where he entertained people with his singing till dawn. The greedy *bay* stayed awake the whole night, listening to the sounds of laughter. As for his meat —he was unable to swallow a single piece of fat. He was already aware that some awful biting nickname invented by Kuyruchuk would be given to him by the morning.

10. How Kuyruchuk Played a Trick on his Visitors

Isabek, Kochorbay, Boronchī, these three left one end of the region of Jumgal and were traveling toward its center. At sunset they reached Bagīshan and decided to spend the night at Kuyruchuk's place and continue their journey the next day. They turned into Kuyruchuk's village. He was sitting with some men on top of a hill. The travelers dismounted and joined them. Kuyruchuk asked:

—Hey, *jigits*, which way are you going?

—We are from the people of Kulzhīgach. We were on our way to Bazar-Turuk when it started getting dark, so we decided to call on you and to look at your house, —answered one of them.

—All right, if your desire is to look at my house, let's go! —And he led the visitors to his house. He went ahead, opening the door:

—This is the door; the cane for it was collected by Chilzhilbay and Ayimkan wove it. The edges of the felt outside were embroidered by Suyumkan. This is the seat of honor. In the same place you may see a stack of blankets and under them some felts. This is my threshold, this is my house. Have you seen it? Are you satisfied? Now, let's go back! He did not even look at the cooking pot, or say a word about it. Have a good journey! Kuyruchuk said.

Not knowing what to do and what to say, the three visitors lowered their heads.

—Saddle your horses! Move! —continued Kuke.

They, however, did not know whether to saddle the horses or to come into the house. At the end Isabek said:

—Kuke, it is dark, and we simply decided to spend the night at your place.

—So you should have said so. Leave the baby talk aside and learn to speak as befits adults! All right! Come into the house! —He said laughing.

The door of the yurt was opened again and the travelers entered. They sat in the place of honor. Now they were not travelers anymore but honored guests. The tension was gone, they were carefree and cheerful. They slaughtered a ram, and put the cauldron over the fire. Kuyruchuk sat there and told many humorous and fascinating stories. This encounter was remembered by all three.

11. The Leprous Yak

One day on the way to his friend's house Kuyruchuk passed a place called At-bashī. As it was late, he made up his mind to spend the night in the village. He went to the biggest yurt. It belonged to *bay* Kazi, Choko's son. Kazi was a cruel, self-willed man. He had a saber that he never took off, even at night. When someone made him angry or disturbed him in his sleep, he attacked the man, sometimes only to threaten, but sometimes he even shed blood.

The *manap* recognized Kuyruchuk and, trying to appear polite, he offered Kuyruchuk accommodation for the night. Then Kazi went out and ordered his *jigits* to slaughter Kuyruchuk's horse. Full of enthusiasm the *jigits* did as they had been told, then chopped up the horse, washed the meat, and put it into a cauldron. The *bay* treated Kuyruchuk kindly. In the morning Kazi said with a sneer:

—Kuke, people say you are an *akin* and a clever jester, but rumor also has it that you rip off the common people. Tell me about your tricks and the amount you make. You must tell me, because you can't leave without your horse. On hearing Kuyruchuk's impudent reply:

—Are you calling me a wolf? Kazi asked angrily.

—Not a wolf but a pack of wolves! — Kuyruchuk answered boldly.

—How dare you . . . ?!

—Yes, you are like a pack of hungry wolves. You made no effort to find a scruffy lamb in the valley, instead you slaughtered your poor guest's horse. What should I call you after that? I can do without the horse, but your tricks will be known in every Kyrgyz village. Shame on you and your whole family!

Kuyruchuk stood up and took his clothes. His words made an impact: Kazi was scared stiff. He did not want to be a disgrace in the eyes of others, especially of the *bays* and *manaps* who were his social equals, so he tried to hush up the scandal. He made an effort to apologize to Kuyruchuk, and asked him to spend another night at his place and slaughtered a sheep for him. Kuyruchuk stayed for the night. In the morning Kazi said:

—Kuke, I beg you to forget the incident and tell no one. I have made a mistake and [in compensation] I shall give you nine head.

But when Kuyruchuk was about to leave, Kazi told his men to bring in nine oxen and a horse. If Kuyruchuk had taken the horse, Kazi would have spread the word that Kuyruchuk was a shameless, greedy man, for he had been promised only the nine. Kuyruchuk mounted the horse and turned to the poor people who came to see him off.

—Good people, Kazi has kindly given me "the nine," and I'm grateful to him. But I don't want his animals, so I give these to you. It seems to me that the tenth ox is leprous; let's give it back to Kazi. A leprous ox for a leprous man.

He chose the tenth "ox" and hit it against the muzzle with a whip. The animal started to run and people laughed watching it run away. This is how Kuyruchuk brought shame upon the arrogant *bay* Kazi.

12. Hey, This is Kuyruchuk

Kuyruchuk decided to take the poor people's sheep to market in order to buy tea, sugar, and clothes with the money. Everybody agreed with him; they gathered the sheep and some brave young *jigits* were ready to accompany him. For the sale of animals a letter of permission was required from the head of the administrative district, who in the Jumgal valley was a certain Bayzak. Kuyruchuk called on Bayzak in the village and explained what he wanted. He approved and issued the letter of permission. Then he brought a gray sheep from its pen and said:

—Kuyruchuk, sell this sheep for me and bring me only its sale price; if it wins a prize, you may keep that.

Kuyruchuk and his companions set out. They arrived in Jalalabad, where they were unable to sell the sheep. But there was something interesting going on here: sheep fights were regularly held. During their visit such a fight was taking place. The winner's owner was awarded a prize and the loser was left with nothing. The winning sheep had been fattened on carrots and grass so that grease was dripping from its wool. Its eyes were blazing and it seemed that, were it to fight a bull, it would still come out winning.

The people of Jumgal were about to witness such a fight. Kuyruchuk's suggestion to bring out Bayzak's sheep was greeted with approval. The gray sheep was not as large as the others, but its legs were fat, its horns were twisted, and its wool had a bluish shade. Kuyruchuk went to the middle and addressed the crowd:

—Brothers, I see that your sheep can butt. This northern sheep also wants to fight. Explain to me the terms of the fight.

A tall, swarthy man began to explain the terms of the fight.

—Northern brothers, sheep fights are a tradition left by our forefathers. The judges decide who will get the prize. Two men have to bring their sheep into the circle and give them an opportunity to sniff each other. After the fight, the loser gives the winner his prize.

A large, black, shaggy sheep with twisted horns was put up to fight the gray sheep. It looked like a bear. The gray sheep looked like a lamb in comparison. Some voices were heard from the crowd, saying that the gray one would be knocked down at once, which was especially likely since it had never taken part in such a fight before.

—We shall see —said Kuyruchuk. It was likely that the sheep from Jalalabad had won fights several times already. Two men brought out the sheep; they let them sniff each other, then took them away and set them free. The sheep charged against each other and people could hear the crashing of horns. Retreating, they charged again and the black opponent fell.

—The winner is the northern brother's sheep! The prize is the cost of a sheep.

After this the gray sheep took part in many fights on the way from Jalalabad to Andijan and never lost. It knocked down many of its opponents and deprived them of their horns. Many people wanted to buy it, and Kuyruchuk eventually sold it in Andijan for the price of forty sheep. The prize was shared out among the shepherds, and the money for the sheep was kept for Bayzak. More than half of the sheep were sold at a profit and it was decided to sell the rest at the next market.

The fast of Ramadan was just coming to an end.

—Today is the eve of the holiday and I shall go to the mosque.

Kuyruchuk went to town, taking two *jigits* with him. People had gathered in the big mosque for the holiday prayer. Kuyruchuk found a place in the last row. After the first prayer came the second one. Kuyruchuk stayed for the second and then for the third prayer. A large cloth had been spread in front of the mullah; on this cloth people who had not kept the fast were putting their donations.

In order to be remembered by the mullah, Kuyruchuk donated some money three times. The mullah indeed remembered him. After everybody had left, Kuyruchuk stayed there. Pointing at Kuyruchuk, the mullah told his helpers that this man had donated three times and must be a pious person. Kuyruchuk, after putting on his galoshes, came up to them and greeted them theatrically.

—This is all you have earned in a day. Let me take the money. —He picked up the cloth by its edges.

—Brother, you have no right to take this cloth, leave it! —said the mullah.

—Hey, mullah, this is Kuyruchuk! You should thank God, if he takes only this cloth! —One of his companions said. The two men stood there watching as Kuyruchuk distributed the money among the poor and destitute. Looking after him, the mullah ordered his companion to summon Kuyruchuk.

—Mullah, have you called me because you are unhappy about me taking that money, or because you wish to give me more? —asked Kuyruchuk.

The mullah took his hand and said:

—Welcome, Kuyruchuk from the North! I watched you handing out alms to poor people. You are a truly good man. I would not have distributed this money myself. —He confessed and ordered his helpers to give Kuyruchuk the cost of a horse.

—I have told you that you are lucky if he takes only that scarf with the money. —His companion said while getting the money out of a trunk and giving it to Kuyruchuk.

Kuyruchuk took the money and they shook hands before he went away.

—How do you know this man? —the mullah asked his companion.

—Two years ago I went to a big market and he was standing on some steps, and whomever he asked to give him five or ten *soms*, this person could not refuse him. Among those giving him money there were some rich merchants. Kuyruchuk then distributed the money thus collected among the poor. Even the greediest of the rich could not refuse him. That's why I warned you.

Kuyruchuk then shared out the money among the shepherds. The next day they sold the rest of the sheep, loaded the horses with merchandise, and returned to Jungal.

13. The Three Merchants

Kuyruchuk did not like merchants. He had seen them cheating and knew that all merchants were bloodsuckers, swindlers, and robbers. As people say, one cannot avoid one's destiny.

Once in the autumn, Kuyruchuk had to take one of the *bay's* sheep to market in Andijan. The horse given to him by his master was so old, bony, and weak that Kuyruchuk had to lead her by the reins there and back. In

Andijan he sold the sheep at a good profit. The *bay* was satisfied and decided to stay in town and go on a drinking spree. Kuyruchuk and the other shepherds were sent back in order not to disturb their master by their presence. He ate so greedily that the next day his shepherds had to set out on an empty stomach. Everybody knows that to a hungry traveler a mile seems like ten, cobblestones seem sharper than knives, and the day seems endless. On the whole, it is dull to walk with an empty stomach. The shepherds had already become completely demoralized when they ran into three horsemen. Kuyruchuk looked at them; they were well-fed and wearing expensive clothes, each carrying a full saddlebag. It meant that they were merchants. If they were merchants, there was some hope that the poor fellows could benefit from the encounter.

It turned out that the merchants were taking this road for the first time, and asked Kuyruchuk to guide them. He agreed at once, and with great pleasure. The merchants' horses were not tired and they hurried on the way. The shepherds were finding it difficult to keep up with them. The merchants stopped only at midnight high in the mountains. By that time Kuyruchuk and his friends could hardly take a step, and they felt sick with hunger. But Kuyruchuk overcame his fatigue and went to gather dry sticks to make a fire. When the merchants saw the big fire, one of them held out a teapot and asked them to make tea. Another one, who appeared to be an Uzbek, gave a deep sigh and murmured:

—I would love to have some pilaf now. The last time I had pilaf was three days ago.

The third merchant agreed.

—It is the same with me. If we had a cooking pot, we could cook it in no time. I have all the ingredients.

Kuyruchuk understood that this was an opportunity for the shepherds to avoid going to bed hungry. The *bay* who had stayed in Andijan had bought a new cooking pot and ordered the shepherds to carry it home. Kuyruchuk immediately unpacked it and held it out to the merchants with a bow.

—Here it is, please. The pot is new and clean.

The merchants were delighted. One of them took out a big piece of fat meat, a sack of rice, and a bottle of oil, but could not find any onions. And what kind of pilaf is it without onions? So Kuyruchuk sent his friends to pick wild onions and gave them to the merchants. Soon the cooking pot was sizzling While the pilaf was cooking, the merchants got into conversation. Kuyruchuk, a great lover of jokes, called himself Chuchukbay and began boasting of his wealth, thousands of sheep and horses and bars of gold. The merchants were listening to these tales with flashing eyes, clicking their tongues respectfully At last the pilaf was ready. The merchants politely invited Kuyruchuk to share the steaming dish, but they did not even glance at the other shepherds. Well, Kuyruchuk knew the rich: for them, poor people do not even count as human. He sat down near the pot in silence, then started tossing bits of rice with his finger here and there, then he did the same with a piece of meat. The Uzbek, who had cooked the pilaf, asked him in surprise why he was not eating properly.

—Well, I went to the bushes, but I forgot to wash my hands, and this is also where the onions had been picked and where the horses are grazing. They are filthy. . . I didn't want to tell you about it, but you asked me yourselves.

The merchants moved aside with disgust. It was just what Kuyruchuk wanted. He seized the pot full of pilaf impudently and took it to his friends.

—Take a seat, brothers! I didn't go anywhere, and the onions had been washed. Eat! The merchants, looking spitefully at the feast of the poor men, began eating dry bread and drinking thin tea. There was nothing they could do

The next morning Kuyruchuk led the caravan along the most difficult path. The horses climbed the steep mountains shaking from exhaustion. And the merchants with their bags were also shaking, together with the horses; by noon they were desperately praying for an easier route.

—There is no other way; Kuyruchuk answered flatly to their lamentation. Completely exhausted, the merchants dismounted, spreading their legs wide. Kuyruchuk stopped. The ridge that they were about to take was covered with snow.

—Hey, honorable merchants! Do you see that hollow? Keep to it all the way. After passing the snowy field you will find a slope leading to the valley. We are going the other way. While the merchants stood there confused and scared, the shepherds took the path that led to their native village.

—Those bloodsuckers are not to be pitied. They have filled their sacks with combs and glass beads, and then they will exchange them for Astrakhan skins and felt mats. Let them get a little bit cold; the road is safe behind the path, even the blind can find it.

The merchants came down the valley with great difficulty. First of all they rushed to the head of the community and complained about Chuchukbay, but no matter how much they complained and screamed, the villagers couldn't understand who Chuchukbay was. So the merchants could not take revenge.

14. “He Bought a Head”

Bekten, the son of the *manap* Janı̄bek, had a gang of forty *jigits*, all thieves and scoundrels. He gave them weapons and they started to rob poor travelers and those *manaps* whom he did not like. The gang was called “the forty robbers” and they terrorized people.

Even the *bays*, *manaps*, and *biys* had no power over them. The robbers kidnapped young girls and whoever tried to do something against them was killed by being bound to a galloping horse and mercilessly dragged behind it.

At that time Kuyruchuk was in his heyday. He came to Tokmok to drink vodka with Bekten. On Sunday, the robbers took the horses that other people wanted to sell at the market, and having sold them they assembled near the market. Bekten was sitting on his horse with his feet dangling and counting the profits. Seeing Kuyruchuk, he addressed him menacingly.

—Hey, stop! Why don’t you greet me?

—I didn’t want to have anything to do with you, so I was trying to go past quietly.

—I’m sure that you don’t know who I am.

—I’ve come here just to get to know you.

—What did you say? Who are you? —He said indignantly at this insolence.

—Do you think I’m just anybody? I’m Kuyruchuk!

Bekten had heard of him.

—Here take a hundred *soms*, but for it you should let me strike your head. Or strike my head but give me a hundred *soms*—he said, thinking that Kuyruchuk would not dare to do it.

Then Kuyruchuk told Bekten:

—Offer your head! Bekten mistook this for a joke, took his sable headgear off calmly and offered Kuyruchuk his head.

Kuyruchuk half rose in the stirrups, folded his whip in two, and struck with all his might. Everything went dark before the robber’s eyes and he fell off head first. Kuyruchuk took a hundred *soms* out of his pocket, threw the money at him, and said:

—Don’t you dare rob people and hold them in fear ever again!

Having said this, Kuyruchuk rode through the crowd of robbers and escaped. The robbers who had witnessed that Bekten had offered his head for a hundred *soms* were not sure whether to pursue Kuyruchuk or not. After this incident Bekten did not dare to continue in his old ways. He parted with his forty men and gave up robbing forever.

15. The Slander

Once Kuyruchuk came to Narın on business. The street was full of people. It turned out that a well-known man, the robust Samankulak, who did not even own a dog and whose roof was leaking, had been accused of robbery. Manap Kazı̄ from At-Bashı̄ accused him of stealing his nine horses and covering his tracks. Kazı̄ hired a judge who sentenced Samankulak to twelve months’ imprisonment and obliged him to pay his alleged debt of nine horses. Who would listen to poor Samankulak when the authorities and the judge were all in Kazı̄’s hands? Having learned the details of the affair, Kuyruchuk stood up in front of the crowd:

—Oh, silent crowd! Wise men! Listen, this is what I have to say! —He said. Those who did not know him thought that the poor man was asking for trouble. —Samankulak is not guilty. The man who accuses him has no idea who is guilty. Having seen Kuyruchuk, Kazı̄ frowned.

—Well, if you are really such a brave man, show me the thief!

—The thief is my nose. —Kuyruchuk answered.

—What did he say?

—I’ve stolen your horses. Be fair to Samankulak and sentence me. I can give you your horses back within ten days.

The judge thought for a while, and questioned Samankulak again and again. Samankulak swore his innocence. The judge eventually decided that Samankulak was innocent, and started to question Kuyruchuk. Kuyruchuk turned to Kazı̄:

—Let’s leave the stolen horses aside for a short time. Answer me, do you plead guilty to forcibly taking my horse and slaughtering it? Do you plead guilty to robbing the travelers who passed through your village? Try to prove your innocence in this matter in front of the people and the judge! Kazı̄, who up until then had been demanding the punishment of the guilty person, hung his head and admitted his guilt:

—It is true, —he said.

The judge was perplexed; he did not know anymore who was the plaintiff and who was the accused.

—To hell with you all! You should settle your own accounts. Do it yourselves! —Having said this, he left, swinging his arms. The people were impressed with Kuyruchuk's presence of mind and courage.

16. The Dead Man Has Come to Life

Once Kuyruchuk went to Chī, which was Shabdan's native village. Shabdan received him as befitted the rules of hospitality. At this time, news came about the death of a Kazakh *bay's* brother. Shabdan took Kuyruchuk to accompany him. According to custom, the corpse had to be ritually washed, but no one wanted to do this, finding some excuse. Eventually, Shabdan suggested:

—Kuyruchuk, can you come and help?

—I have never seen a corpse in my life. I shall come in, but I won't touch the corpse. Otherwise I'll faint and disgrace all our people. Let me pour the water.

Shabdan asked for the elders' advice, who decided that Kuyruchuk should only pour the water. Five men came in for the ablution.

While performing his duty, Kuyruchuk noticed that the index, middle, and ring fingers of the corpse were half-bent, and nobody could open them. Kuyruchuk made up his mind to use the occasion for a joke. He hooked the corpse's half-bent fingers to the robe pocket of one of those washing the body. As soon as this man stood up, the corpse's head rose following him, then the whole body. Seeing the rising corpse, the man ran to the door screaming. The fingers came unhooked and the body was left upright leaning against the yurt frame.

—Has the dead man come back to life? —Kuyruchuk shouted.

Everybody who was washing the body rushed to the door, tearing the curtain strings. The women sitting in the yurt also ran out, shouting. Only Kuyruchuk stayed in the yurt and kept yelling: "He is killing me!" Everybody began to pray, but no one was brave enough to come in. Some people even mounted their horses to get away quicker. After some time Kuyruchuk, pretending to look weak, went out to the people.

—This corpse has nearly killed me. I happened to be at his place. I just about managed to tie him to the frame of the yurt. What shall I do with him now, take him out or try to lay him down with the help of prayers?

—Try to lay him down somehow, —The host begged. — I'll give you everything you want. Kuyruchuk went back into the yurt and began praying aloud for everybody to hear:

—If you go out, you'll frighten away all the people. It's a bad omen when the dead come alive. Lie down!

He repeated this several times. Then he went out and said:

—He doesn't want to lie down. Perhaps the prayer of the chief mullah will convince him.

The *bay* sent for a mullah. When Kuyruchuk suggested that he should come into the yurt, the mullah answered that, according to custom, he should pray without looking into the dead man's eyes. Then Kuyruchuk said that if he was afraid he could pray outside. The mullah knelt down and, closing his eyes tightly, began to pray. Keeping it short, he finished his prayers quickly.

—Moldoke. —Kuyruchuk addressed him. —Since I am the man who has overcome the dead man, I shall come into the yurt. —With these words he entered the yurt.

—Well, enough! No good will come out of this! Moldoke has prayed and now you should really die. What did you say? Do you want to take the mullah with you to the other world?

Some time later he shouted:

—God has mercy, Moldoke! He has fainted. Come here, we shall lay him down together.

Having heard this, the mullah, trembling with fear, said:

—Lay him down yourself! According to Islamic law a mullah should not see a person who has died twice. Kuyruchuk went out and said:

—If it were not for Moldoke's prayers, he would still be fighting me. Come in! I don't think he will stand up again. If he rises, the end of the world has come.

He could hardly persuade the women to come in.

—Rest in peace, my Kazakh brother. You almost took me with you to the other world. If you come alive again, I won't come.

With these words he opened the curtain and left the yurt. Everybody was amazed at his courage.

—Oh, God! If it were not for this brave Kyrgyz, —the Kazakhs said, —we would have been disgraced.

The dead man was buried. As a token of gratitude Kuyruchuk was given a blue hat and a gray horse. Shabdan received a harnessed gray horse. On their way back Shabdan expressed his admiration for the honor and good reputation Kuyruchuk acquired. When Kuyruchuk was asked how he had managed to overcome the dead man, he answered:

—Try to die and come alive again. Then you'll see how Kuke fights!

17. How Did Kuyruchuk Acquire this Nickname?

He was very young at the time. Kuyruchuk arrived in Bayzak's village. As usual, Bayzak was sitting with the *aksakals* on a small mound and talking. Having tied his horse nearby, he approached the group and, greeting the elders, he sat down near them. The *aksakals* were drinking fermented mare's milk and were absorbed in the conversation. Meat was being cooked. Kuyruchuk washed his hands and they were all offered some meat. The younger ones started to eat. Kuyruchuk had *bash-barmak* and *shorpo*, after which he rose from the table, licking his fingers.

Bayzak asked:

—Would you like to have more?

—The falcon, having had his fill, does not put his beak in the food the second time around —answered Kundaybergen.

Pleased with the boy's witty answer, Bayzak-batır remarked:

—Look, how this Kurmuchuk speaks!

He gave Kuyruchuk a horse, his old coat, and saw the visitor off, saying:

—Come again, my son Kuyruchuk.

It was due to his jolly tricks that he received the nickname Kuyruchuk, rather than "Kurmuchuk" as Bayzak first addressed him, but this nickname was also bestowed upon him by Bayzak-batır. One *manap*, or rich man, named Kobegen lived in Kochkor. At that time the Uzbeks who were living among the Kyrgyz gave credit to people at high interest so that many debtors became impoverished. The Uzbeks also used religion to gain profit. Some deceived childless women, assuring them that they could conceive with the help of their amulets. Besides, they also amassed wealth in the form of cattle and household utensils. One day three Uzbeks from Tokmok, involved in such affairs, arrived to collect debts. They were eyeing a ram, hoping to make a profitable deal.

It was around this time that Kuyruchuk happened to call on Kobegen, and Kobegen's wife complained about the Uzbek merchants, who took advantage of young girls and robbed people. Upon hearing this, Kuyruchuk decided to teach the merchants a lesson, and stayed in Kobegen's house, where the Uzbek guests were also put up for the night, and settled close to their beds. Winter was approaching. At night one of the guests went out into the yard to let his horse graze. Kuyruchuk took his place, and, having seen the returning guest, he started snarling like a dog. The guest, wishing to get back into his warm bed as quickly as possible, called Ismat-ake. But Ismat-ake was fast asleep. When the guest stretched out his hand to whip the dog, Kuyruchuk darted into his bed. The guest swung his whip and with all his strength and struck the *bay* lying beside him. Being hit on the face, the *bay* woke everyone with his furious screaming. They all started accusing one another in search of the culprit. The guilty Uzbek excused himself, saying that he only wanted to chase the dog away. There was nothing they could do: the bed was soiled with blood, the *bay's* face was disfigured, and he could not show himself in front of people.

At this point Kuyruchuk suggested to the Uzbeks:

—There is only one way out! You must disappear before the day breaks. If you do not, you will be ridiculed by the Kyrgyz and they will never forget this incident. The merchants begged him not to say a word about what had happened to anyone, and they left that same night. It was thanks to Kuyruchuk that people were freed from their debts.

18. Dmitriy's Story

Once, engineers were doing some work on the dam building in the Chui valley between Chīm—Korgon and Tokmok. There were four workers with me. They were put up in the house of an old Russian man, Dmitriy Ivanovich Kulakov. He was over eighty. He told us a story about Kuyruchuk. He spoke Kyrgyz very well.

It was time to hold Shabdan's funeral repast. My father advised me to drive there with a cart of apples, melons, and watermelons for the arriving Kyrgyz. Many people came. We began trading and the Kyrgyz took everything very quickly, many without even paying for my goods. My father went to complain to the Russians, but they merely advised us to either punish some of the Kyrgyz or to complain to the head of the administrative district. But he was likewise unable to help. Then we noticed a horseman around whom a large crowd had gathered; the man was entertaining them with his stories. There were also many Russians among the guests who had come to participate in Shabdan's funeral repast. One of them, a man called Alyosha, explained that the man was Kuyruchuk, a Kyrgyz jester who advised people to ask him for help. My father went up to him and explained everything to him in Russian, while I translated into Kyrgyz. I learned this language when I played with Kyrgyz boys. Kuyruchuk ordered a blanket to be spread near the cart. Then he began to shout:

—Newcomers to the funeral! You have come here in order to pray and get God's grace in return, is that so?! You have eaten Dmitriy's melons and watermelons. God will not forgive your sin. Let's pay him even if you have not eaten anything!

Having said this, he was the first to come to the blanket and put 50 *tïyïn* on it. All the Kyrgyz followed him and gave some money, 10 or 5 *tïyïn*, and a large sum was collected.
—Since that time I have not forgotten the name Kuyruchuk—finished Dmitriy.

19. Kuyruchuk's Tale

I heard this story from Shïykumbay uulu Joldoshbay.

I first met Kuyruchuk at the age of twenty-five, in Toluk. He was a tall man with protruding cheekbones and at the time he was staying at his friend Omoke's house.

—I knew many *manaps* during my life. —Kuyruchuk began. —At this time Kasimbek uulu Sultangazï had three thousand houses under his authority. He invited me twice, but I could only accept his invitation the third time. He had prepared a big yurt, so spacious that the word uttered at one end could not be heard at the other end. His men met us and took us to this yurt. Some time later Sultangazï appeared with a tiger skin coat thrown over his shoulders.

—You only accepted my invitation the third time. Perhaps you have never heard my name, or maybe you don't like me?

—Try to figure it out yourself, even though you are younger than me. I thought, maybe this *manap* deserves more than the dog's leftovers. Only then did the *manap* become silent. Some time later he asked his *jigits* how many guests had come. They answered that there were eighty guests. Then he ordered them to slaughter a mare. After they had eaten some of the meat, he asked.

—Kuke, they say that you take all you want. Maybe I can prepare something for you to take, too. Tell me what you wish!

—All right, but first let me warn you. You will give me ten yaks, all of which should have a black forehead. Then add an ox that should also have a black forehead. All in all, eleven head. That is what I will take from you; I don't need anything else.

—All right, everything will be as you said, but stay with us for three days. In honor of your stay, each day we shall slaughter a sheep. Three days later:

—Let us leave. —Kuyruchuk said.

Ten yaks were tied to the tree. But the ox turned out to have a red forehead.

—I shall not take the ox because it has a red forehead. —He said. At once a yak was brought with a black forehead to replace the ox. In addition nine cows, nine horses and nine sheep were prepared for him to take, but he only took what he had asked for and left the rest.

—I have all this prepared for you. Why don't you want to take it? —asked Sultangazï.

—I'm not that sort of person. I take only what I have asked for. —Kuyruchuk answered and left. Sultangazï was greatly impressed:

—Thank you, Kuke! Now it is clear why people call you Kuyruchuk.

20. How Kuyruchuk Came in Dry From the Rain

One day Shabdan, on his way from Tokmak near the Boom ravine, met Kuyruchuk and decided to take him along to accompany him. As they came to the land of Chong-Kemin, dark clouds appeared over the mountains. Of course, Shabdan was dressed warmly but Kuyruchuk, as usual, was in his thin trousers and cotton shirt. Soon it began to drizzle, and then to rain heavily. Shabdan and his retainers put on their coats, but Kuyruchuk got wet immediately. And it was still a long way to the village.

—Oh, Master, perhaps we can halt at that village and wait until the rain is over, —said Kuyruchuk, turning to Shabdan with chattering teeth.

—Hey, fool, are you afraid of the rain? —Shabdan laughed and continued his way calmly.

—Oh, Master, perhaps we can hurry up, at least.

—Nothing will happen to you, you'll see, God doesn't need you! You aren't made out of clay, you won't melt —snapped Shabdan.

What can you do? You can't just scream at the powerful Shabdan, and you can't disobey. But it continued to rain heavily, and it was cold. Kuyruchuk had to come up with something.

—Oh, Master, you and your *jigits* may ride slowly, but I shall gallop ahead to inform people about your arrival.

—Kuyruchuk suggested. He whipped his mare and Shabdan had no time to open his mouth. But obviously God got angry with the poor man: deafening thunder was heard and the lightning struck. Kuyruchuk fell off his mare. When Shabdan saw him, he sent two of his men. They dismounted and began to shake Kuyruchuk by his shoulders.

—Open your eyes! Wake up!

Kuyruchuk raised his eyelids slightly and whispered weakly.

—Tell the *batır* that I'm dying because of his obstinacy. I am Shabdan's victim. My children will be orphans . . .

—he dropped feebly.

Arriving, Shabdan saw Kuyruchuk's motionless body and asked anxiously.

—What has happened to this fool?

—Kuyruchuk is dead, but before he died he blamed you for his death.

Hearing these words, Shabdan trembled, then he took his spare coat and wrapped the body in it. They all hurried to the village in silence. The *bay* did not wish to become known as the cause of Kuyruchuk's death. People loved Kuyruchuk, and word gets around quickly. Indeed, even before they reached the village the rumor had already spread:

—Shabdan is guilty of Kuyruchuk's death.

Kuyruchuk's body was not brought to the *manap*'s yurt, but to a poorer one. Shabdan suspected that Kuyruchuk may have played a trick on him, so he kept sending his men to the yurt, hoping that Kuyruchuk would rise, but he lay there motionless. Shabdan lost face and had no idea what to do. The cattle had already been sacrificed for the funeral, and they were about to send a messenger to Kuyruchuk's family. Meanwhile Kuyruchuk was lying wrapped up warm and chuckling. Each time one of Shabdan's servants approached to check upon him, he pretended to be dead; but when the person left, he opened his eyes and listened attentively to the conversation and noise behind the yurt. Having waited until all the villagers had assembled to pay their respects to the dead man, Kuyruchuk decided that it was time to show signs of life. When the next servant came in, Kuyruchuk moved his toe that was sticking out from under the old coat. The *jigit* was scared and ran out of the yurt. Having heard about the miracle, the villagers got excited. Forgetting his pomposity, even Shabdan ran out of his yurt and immediately sent his *jigits* to Kuyruchuk. When they started approaching the yurt with big clubs in their hands, Kuyruchuk came out and stood in the doorway, wearing the *bay*'s coat. He went straight to Shabdan without saying a single word. The *manap*, unable to face the encounter, ran back into his yurt.

—*Batır*, don't run. It appears that Allah did not need me. Besides, you kept on sending your brave *jigits*, so I have changed my mind about dying, so as not to frighten them.

On hearing the familiar voice, the crowd laughed.

—Master, what should we do with your coat? It has already been on a corpse.

—Oh, you might as well choke on it! —Came the angry voice from the yurt.

Kuyruchuk bowed towards the yurt, saying:

—So I have emerged unharmed.

21. Thirty Samovars and Two Old Goats

Since Kuyruchuk was very poor, he was unable to organize a feast marking the first anniversary of his mother's death. He thought a lot, but he did not have the means to do it. At such feasts, one must offer hospitality and organize a horse race for which cattle are needed as prizes. But where could Kuyruchuk possibly get them?

The *manaps* or *bays*, who were the rich men in the village, such as Kokumbay, Kurman, and Mırzabek, were surely not going to help Kuyruchuk. Time went by without the son fulfilling his duty. At last, Kuyruchuk found a way out. He called his young male friends and asked them to invite guests and to borrow samovars from the *bays*. He asked his friends to bring as many samovars as possible.

The *jigits* brought the samovars and Kuyruchuk arranged them in rows near his yurt. Someone asked him:

—Why do you need so many samovars?

—I shall brew a special tea to treat the *bays* at the commemoration feast.

—What makes it so special?

—I have found the water of life. If a person drinks it, he will live forever.

Soon the guests started arriving. Common people came on time, but Kokumbay, Mırzabek, and Kurman demonstrated their reluctance to come and arrived late. Kuyruchuk understood this and prepared a suitable dish for them: he slaughtered two old stinking goats and boiled their meat. The *bays* were seated in the place of honor, washed their hands, and took their knives The meat was served by the host himself. He felt nauseated as he dished out the meat and served it up to his guests. But he managed to put it on the table and to offer it to them loudly so that everybody present could hear his words:

—Dear honorable guests! This meat is from Mecca. It is sacred and it is a great honor to be able to offer it to you. The *bays* had no choice but eat this meat. To reject hospitality at a commemoration feast would have meant offending not only the hosts but also the deceased.

—Oh, dear! What a horrible stench! Mırzabek shouted, taking a bone.

—Help yourselves, dear guests, I was in luck. The other day a pilgrim returning from Mecca passed by, and gave me this meat as God's gift.

—But where is the head? Kurman asked with distrust.

—There are honorable men in Mecca, too, and they are not in the habit of giving away meat with the head; the head was eaten there.

While Kuyruchuk regaled the honorable guests with the stinking, sinewy goat's meat, the commoners were eating fresh lamb heartily. Finally, the dinner was over. It was time for the horse race. The guests looked at the fast horses, and the race began. After some time the horses started the last lap. The first rider crossed the finish line, then the second, then the third. Standing by the samovars, Kuyruchuk, putting on airs, presented them as prizes. People laughed but took the prizes; after all, it is useful to have a samovar at home.

But there was one strange thing: each winner got his own samovar back, which the *jigits* had borrowed from him a day or two before. In giving away the samovars, Kuyruchuk did not make a mistake: the poor man had no horses, so no one was offended. When the *bays* gave Kuyruchuk a puzzled look, he only shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his eyes.

When the commemoration feast was over and the guests had departed, Kuyruchuk wrapped himself up in a fur coat and retired to his yurt to sleep. But some greedy guests came back, demanding their samovars.

Kuyruchuk gave them a surprised look and said:

—What samovars are you talking about? Everybody saw me handing them over to you today! Go away!

He turned over and fell asleep.

22. Who Will God Listen To?

They say that once Kuyruchuk struck it lucky: in a game of *ordo* he won a whole flock of sheep, all in all ten head, from *bay* Esenkul. The owner was a wealthy man and he simply prayed to Allah. As for Kuyruchuk, he drove the sheep to the bazaar, where he started yelling:

—Hey, beggars, you can buy these fat, heavy sheep on credit. You will have to pay me back only when *bay* Esenkul dies. As long as he is alive, I will not ask from you even a penny. You have credit until Esenkul dies.

The sheep, of course, were bought, and the *jigits* informed Esenkul that Kuyruchuk had wished for his death in front of all the people. The *bay* was furious and he sent for Kuyruchuk. Kuyruchuk came and looked impassively in the eyes of the powerful *bay*, the fame of whose bad temper superseded rumors about his kindness.

—Is it true that you wish I were dead? On top of disgracing me by winning the game, you also want me to die soon?

—Worthy Esenkul, tell me whether a smart person will listen to one or several people?

—Even my youngest son knows that the word of two people is to be trusted more than the word of one.

—What is my fault then? Just think: I'm the only person who wishes your early death, but ten poor men are praying for your immortality day and night. Who will God listen to? You should be grateful to me rather than angry.

What could the *bay* reply to this? He was gritting his teeth furiously:

—You have got away once again, you damned impostor! —And he let Kuyruchuk go.

23. "Tell Him What I Said!"

One day Kuyruchuk went to Ter-Jaylak to visit Orozbay. It was the time of the October Revolution and the power of the *bays* and *manaps* was declining. But as this place was a great distance away from the center, it did not affect the *bays* of Sarī-Kamīsh. Orozbay slaughtered a horse in honor of Kuyruchuk's arrival and received him with respect. Having noticed grief in Orozbay's eyes, Kuyruchuk asked:

—Is everything all right with you or are you suffering from some illness?

—Eh Kuke! Everything is all right with my health. I live in prosperity. But I have a problem that does not leave me even in my dreams. I'm already old and I have no heirs. When I close my eyes, there will be no son to continue in my footsteps. It is hard for me. My riches will not be needed. Who will be my heir?

—Orozbay, how can your spoiled young wife give you an heir if she sits in a saddle like a man both in winter and in summer?! It is not your fault, so do not reproach yourself with it. Your tomboy of a wife Saadat will bear you two sons and a daughter. Your children will grow up sensible and thrifty . . . Orozbay cried with joy:

—May your words come true!

—When a child is born, you will give me a present for the good news, regardless if it happens in winter or in summer. My village is in Jungal.

A year later Orozbay and Saadat had a son and they named him Karī. Orozbay gave Kuyruchuk a mare and a colt. Having received the news, Kuyruchuk blessed the child, telling the messenger:

—May the ties be strong! May his children avoid Orozbay's troubles. Tell him what I said!

As Kuyruchuk had predicted, after Karī a second son, Sejī, and a daughter, Sandal, were born. Later nothing was left of Orozbay's riches, and he fell into poverty and died in prison. But his children still live in safety and health.

. . . And this is how Kuyruchuk's prediction came true.

24. Had I Become Younger?

In the summer of 1921, Kuyruchuk came from Jungal to Pishpek in the north of Kyrgyzstan, which was part of the Semirechinsk district. The Soviet Union was young, and its officials inexperienced. I have no reason to hide the fact that occasionally the *bays'* sons and scholars, who had served the tsar, managed to enter the ranks of the Soviet authorities and carried on acting as before.

So Kuyruchuk arrived in Pishpek and visited the marketplace, where he bought some small things including textiles, sugar, and matches. Suddenly a man ran up to him and said:

—Kuke, our authorities are summoning you.

Kuyruchuk had no choice but to go. Several leaders were waiting for him.

—Kuke, —one of them said, —we are expecting a visit from an honored guest from Almaty today. We would like you to meet him, and when the time comes you should praise him: please say something flattering to him.

Kuyruchuk agreed. They went to the Almaty highway to meet the guest. One man working for the authorities was evidently worried and anxious, continually giving orders. Kuyruchuk watched this entire bustle quietly.

Suddenly some people started shouting: “He is coming! He is coming!” An open carriage appeared on the road. The spectators lined up and the honored guest walked slowly along the line, greeting each person with a handshake. Then it was Kuyruchuk’s turn. He looked much like a poor man —he wore a tattered coat and an old skull-cap. The guest asked his guides:

—Who is this man?

—He is the famous Kyrgyz trickster, a just and honest man, the witty Kuyruchuk.

—Oh! I know him, I have heard about him! I want to ask you three questions, which you should answer without thinking.

Kuyruchuk bowed his head and replied.

—Dear guest, before hearing your three questions, would you please answer my only question?

—Well, ask it.

—Is it true that I have become younger? You have time to think . . .

—Well, it is a strange question . . . And why do you think that your youth has returned?

—Why? It seems to me that I have become twenty to thirty years younger.

—But why?

—I will tell you why I think so. I know that the Soviet leaders are simple and modest, they are not conceited. But some of our officials became pale as they heard about your arrival. They prepared a white yurt with thin carpets and soft pillows. You will eat the meat of fattened horses and tender lambs. A stallion, a silver saddle, and a lot of money have been prepared for you as a gift. These preparations remind me of the old visits of local dignitaries and district chiefs twenty or thirty years ago.

—Dear elder! Thank you for your warning. I have now been convinced that you are indeed a just and honest man, who also has courage and presence of mind. I am no feudal lord, nor district chief, of course, and I do not accept bribes. I have never lived in a white yurt and I do not intend to do so now. I used to be a shepherd, now I am a communist, and I have come here to become acquainted with the Kyrgyz people. Those who wanted to greet me as if we still lived in the past will be duly punished. I want you to be near me throughout my visit, I shall need you.

Everything happened as he said. The honored guest stayed in an inn, eating his meals in a dining hall. During his trips he was accompanied by Kuyruchuk and listened to his witty characterizations of people. Since then the reception of visiting Soviet leaders has become much simpler.

25. “Fill the Holes!”

This is a story about Karımbaı, a sly businessman. In the autumn he usually bought up most of the grain cheaply and stored it in holes that had been dug in his yard. He sold the grain in the spring and in the early summer, when prices were high.

—Hey, I can even buy happiness in the bazaar! —He used to boast in public.

He prevented children from going to school whenever he could, because he was of the opinion that real wealth was to be found in the bazaar, and that there was no use in studying unless they wanted to be “great men.”

—Studying is worthless, it’s better to understand the bazaar well, and you will make money. Money is everything! He used to say.

When all the poor villagers joined the collective farm, he refused:

—What should I do there? I have my bazaar instead!

One day Kuyruchuk and his friend Tolesh were returning from the miller’s and they decided to call on this peasant. As they drove into the yard they saw the holes. The whole yard was full of holes. Kuyruchuk was astonished and shook his head. But at that moment there came the host, a tall swarthy man with a long neck and a shiny bald head,

and asked Tolesh:

—Hey, who is that with you?

—It's the famous Kuyruchuk! Don't you recognize him?

Karimbaï was almost paralyzed with astonishment, and thought: "Indeed, the famous Kuyruchuk has come to beg for some grain. Well, perhaps if I give him a sack of grain, he will praise me, and everyone will call me a good soul!"

—It's very good that Kuyruchuk has come to me. Get off your horses and follow me into the house. Please, have some dinner. Kuyruchuk must have come all the way from Jungal.

In a short time the yard had filled up with people who wanted to see Kuyruchuk. But Kuyruchuk remained mounted, scratching his chin from time to time, without answering his host's flattering words.

—Kuyruchuk, why don't you dismount? —asked the astonished Tolesh. Firmly looking at Karimbaï, Kuyruchuk said aloud:

—Hey, Tolesh *aksakal*. It's the best of times now, people everywhere are joining the *kolkhoz*, there is abundance and love everywhere, but look at this person torturing himself; he has dug up his yard by himself. This bald-headed devil dreams about profit; he thirsts after human blood. Is it worth visiting a man whose head is as empty as these holes? No, Tolesh, let's go.

Karimbaï's face went first red then pale. He stood there perplexed. Trying to avoid shame, he began to beg Kuyruchuk again to dismount and to accept his hospitality. At last Kuyruchuk accepted the invitation and entered the house. The owner mumbled, anxiously bowing in front of the guest:

—Kuyruchuk, I shall not let you leave empty-handed. Take a sack of flour, but please don't say bad things about me in front of other people!

—Hey, Karimbaï, I have had a long life and have seen many things, but I have never met a person who has found happiness in the bazaar. Thank you for the flour, but I will not take it. The flour is bitter from the tears of poor people who have to pay you three times the normal price for it. Why are you living in isolation from other people? Don't you see that people pass by you, as they pass over the holes in your yard?

—Kuyruchuk, what should I do?

Kuyruchuk burst out laughing.

—Hey, Tolesh, trading has made him so stupid that he is unable to understand human speech. Help him to join the others and enter the *kolkhoz* before he goes completely crazy. Help him to fill the holes between him and the people. Only bloodthirsty wolves and sly foxes live in holes. People must live above the ground . . .

Kuyruchuk's wise words spread quickly among the people. And who knows—maybe not only Karimbaï reflected over his words. Tolesh is now one hundred and five years old, and often tells this story.

26. "White *Kulak*, Black *Kulak*, All the Same *Kulak*!"

Kuyruchuk was well over sixty years old when the collectivization began. But he still had the eye of an eagle, a good mind, and a sharp tongue. That year towns and small villages forgotten by God and people, mountains and valleys, the poor people's huts and the houses of the rich were all in a state of unrest. Everybody everywhere was wondering what the unprecedented innovations would bring him.

The poor were hoping for a better life, the *bays*, *manaps*, *kulaks*, and *mullahs* were painting as dark a picture of the new life as possible, predicting hunger, cold, and the everlasting torments in the life beyond. While threatening the poor in this way they were trying to worm their way into the *kolkhoz*.

People gathered in Kuyruchuk's village to solve the problem of the *kolkhoz*. Family heads were joined there by women and children. The chairman of the village council opened the meeting and the [Soviet] official who had just arrived explained the significance of the *kolkhoz* and the life awaiting them there. People discussed this and decided in favor of joining and began to register. But Kuyruchuk was sitting there in silence, watching and listening attentively as the rich men's sons followed the poor into the *kolkhoz*. They were specially clad in rags for the occasion. They must have stolen the winter shoes and old patched fur coats of their shepherds for the purpose. The unfortunate beggars! The official did not know them, and local people could not bring themselves to unmask them: some were afraid; others did not want to betray their clan loyalties. So, the whole village joined the *kolkhoz*. The chairman asked:

—Who is still left? Every poor person must be in the *kolkhoz*.

Kuyruchuk kept silent. He then lifted both his fists and first looked at the one and then at the other. His neighbor looked at him and, jumping up, shouted:

—Comrades, why has Kuyruchuk not registered?

There was uproar. The chairman and the official asked in unison:

—Respectable Kuyruchuk, why are you silent? The old man stood up and raised his fists again.

Everyone went quiet, waiting for a joke. Kuyruchuk examined first one fist, and then the other and suddenly turned

to the official:

—You have said that the “white” *kulaks* are not allowed to join the *kolkhoz*. How about the “black” ones, are they allowed?

The official replied, perplexed:

—I don’t understand which “black ones” you are talking about.

—These.

Kuyruchuk pointed at the men who had disguised themselves as beggars one after the other.

—This one is the son of a *bay*, and that one is the son of a *manap*. Look, they are wearing the dirty, ragged clothes of poor people. I think that—he raised his fists again—it makes no difference whether it is a right fist or a left fist—all that matters is that it is a fist. White *bay*, black *bay*, they are all *bays*. I shall never join the *kolkhoz* if they are admitted. I spent all my life fighting against their fathers. This was all he said. Kuyruchuk then sat down and the meeting took a new course. The “black *kulaks*” were deleted from the list, and Kuyruchuk, an old man with the brave heart of a young man, registered.

27. Omor, the Evil Magician

All this happened in the 1930s. Many poor people entered the *kolkhoz*, dreaming of a happy life. Thinking that property gained unlawfully would bring no profit, one *bay* summoned Omor, a poor man, and gave him a water mill as a present. This was the only mill for the whole district. This is how Omor began to keep house. Although he was ignorant and stupid, he understood quickly that everybody, members of the *kolkhoz*, orphans, and widows, needed the mill to grind their cereal. He made other people work for him and he sold his grain at a very high price. He bought sheep, cows, horses, and he became rich as if he were a *manap* or *bay* in pre-Soviet times. Nobody could persuade him to join the others. He was advised many times:

—Join the others, enter the *kolkhoz*!

But he laughed:

—I have no time to argue with you.

In this village Kuyruchuk had an old friend by the name of Telesh. Once as Kuyruchuk was visiting him, they talked while sitting around the table and Telesh complained about the unscrupulous miller’s behavior. Kuyruchuk thought a little while, then stood up and went out to the yard. He saddled his horse and went away, but soon he returned to his friend.

—Telesh, take me to Omor, please, and spread the news that I am going there and that everyone else should also go to the mill.

Telesh was surprised but did as he had been told. His wife ran to the neighbors.

—Oh, *bay*! Kuyruchuk is coming here! —said the workers to the miller.

Omor—a big man with a black beard—became very anxious. Of course, he was flattered to be visited by the famous Kuyruchuk, but he was also frightened: the sharp tongue of the guest was known to old and young, and people knew that if something was not to his liking, he could bring shame upon the ill-doers mercilessly. Omor invited the old man into the house. Kuyruchuk came up to the adobe wall, touched it, looked at his finger, and smelled it. The master, the workers, the women, and the omnipresent children watched each of his movements in amazement.

—Omor, it’s too damp in your house. I won’t enter it.

The master ordered the carpets to be spread out on the grass. The guest sat down. Omor saw several heavy sacks on Kuyruchuk’s horse.

—Oh, dear Kuke, your horse must be very tired. Let me take the sacks.

—Black-bearded man, you seem to be a kind person. I bring the wheat. Please, ask your men to mill it.

—Hey, workers, mill the wheat from these sacks!

Three workers ran to carry out the order, but one of them returned immediately, looking confused, and whispered to his master:

—Master, instead of wheat, there is only sand in the sacks of the honorable guest!

—Why are you lying, you fool?

—I swear! If you don’t believe me, you should see for yourself.

—Well, miller, have you milled the wheat? —asked Kuyruchuk lazily, looking at the miller and the worker mischievously. The miller turned to the guest with a frightened look:

—Dear Kuke . . . I don’t understand . . . There is only sand in your sacks but no wheat. The wheat turned into sand . . . May God punish me if I lie . . .

People who surrounded Omor and his guest were both anxious and astonished. Kuyruchuk was only waiting for this. He stood up and looked at the miller sternly.

—Hey, black-bearded man, you want to deceive me. You turned my wheat into sand and now you are pretending not to know about anything! No, you are not a miller, you are an evil magician! That’s why you don’t want to enter the

kolkhoz. Omor murmured anxiously:

—No, honorable Kuke, no! I'm a miller . . . no, I'm a miller, I'm not an evil magician!

—You are no magician?! And where do those black and white sheep come from?—Standing up, Kuyruchuk pointed at the animals.—I think you made them from the pieces of bread that you had taken away from poor people. And these horses? Don't they come from the orphans' soup? And this white house with big windows? You have built it from the widow's tears. No, let's run away from here, before he turns us all into bulls and donkeys in order to make us work for him!

Whipping his horse, Kuyruchuk rode towards the village. People followed him. Only the greedy Omor was left there standing in the middle of the yard with a silly look on his face, watched by his frightened workers from the door of the mill.

Soon, the *kolkhoz* built a big mill, and that was the end of the evil magician—Omor.

28. "I Shall Take Neither 99 nor 101 . . ."

Soon after the collective farms had been organized, Kuyruchuk came to visit his friends in the Chuy valley. Kuyruchuk's friend Kasakun was chairman of the Soviet. He received Kuyruchuk cordially. When the active members of the collective farm had heard about Kuyruchuk's arrival, they came to Kazakun to be entertained by Kuyruchuk's jokes and interesting stories.

Kuyruchuk told many humorous, edifying, amusing, and biting stories. At the same time he was watching people, how they lived, how they worked . . . It was spring and the weather was wet and muddy. Exhausted after a hard winter, the animals were standing in a leaking shed with their heads down. Earlier in the spring a disease had killed many of the animals of the young collective farm. But at the same time, those sheep that were in private ownership were well-nourished and frisky. While the collective farm had neither hay nor straw, several houses had huge stacks of hay in their barns.

On Sunday the collective farmers went to town to sell their hay and returned with good purchases. Many of them were drunk and could hardly hold themselves in the saddle. That evening Kuyruchuk was invited by the chairman of the collective farm. Kuyruchuk brought Kasakun along. On their way to the chairman's house they called at other farmers' houses and invited them to come along. On their way to the chairman's, Kuyruchuk suddenly noticed a dead calf that must have starved to death. He thought for a minute and then said "Continue your journey while I stay here." When the collective farmers went away Kuyruchuk got off his horse, broke off one of the cow horns, and followed them.

There were many guests in the chairman's house. They were drinking and they tried to persuade Kuyruchuk to tell them an entertaining story. Kuyruchuk pulled out the horn quietly and put it down. On seeing the horn the chairman and some of the tipsy farmers began laughing, anticipating a joke.

—Gentlemen, I have a question for you.—Said Kuyruchuk watching the people.

—Go ahead, Kuyruchuk!

—Be quiet, let him speak!

Everybody become silent.

—Tell me, what sort of a horn is it?

—Why! It's the horn of a cow!

—If you recognize it, then listen to me. Does this horn need hay?

—Of course, Kuyruchuk, of course.

The guests roared with laughter.

—Then each of you must give one hundred hay stacks or I shall shame you.

—All right, Kuyruchuk, we'll do as you wish.

—I shall take neither 99 nor 101, only 100. I have sworn that I would only take what I have asked for, neither more nor less.

—All right, Kuyruchuk, for you we shall do everything. Where shall we bring the hay?

—Tomorrow at dawn you should bring the hay to the shed, where horses and cows belonging to the collective farm are, and do not forget that I shall collect the hay myself.

—All right, Kuyruchuk. Everything will be done.

After this Kuyruchuk entertained the people for quite some time. When they were too tired to laugh anymore, the host served meat. Kuyruchuk, as guest of honor, was given the head of a sheep. He looked at it amused and pretended to listen to it. All people in the house began to laugh and one of them asked.

—Kuyruchuk, has this head whispered something in your ear?

—You're right, this head says that it used to belong to the collective farm and the chairman slaughtered it because he did not want to sacrifice his own sheep. He saved his sheep but he could not save himself.

The people burst out laughing. But the chairman was in no mood to laugh.

In the morning Kuyruchuk asked his friend Kasakun to donate a hundred haystacks and came to the barn. Some people were delivering hay while others were preparing to do so. Kuyruchuk watched them making their donations. Women and children came running from the village and wondered: why does Kuyruchuk need so much hay? Does he want to sell it?

—Hey, men! —Kuyruchuk turned to them—Thank you for honoring me. Follow me—he led the puzzled farmers into the barn —look at these wretched animals, you see that they can hardly stand and once they lie down they will never stand up. This is it. You must understand that they are your cattle. I don't need the hay. You'd better use it to feed these animals and don't spend so much time thinking of vodka!

The collective farmers were hanging their heads in shame, and they looked as if it was the first time they had seen hungry animals or a barn full of hay.

Before leaving, Kuyruchuk reminded the farmers of the proverb: “If you don't feed an animal, it will die; if you don't take care of your wife, she will go away.”

29. “Shame on You, Mergen!”

A sheep was stolen from old Apal's yard. Next day, asking people about the stolen sheep, she came to Kuyruchuk.

—My dear Kuyruchuk! Today or tomorrow my only daughter will visit me with her husband. The sheep that I wanted to slaughter for their arrival has been stolen. I have been searching for it everywhere. May the thief be cursed! People respect you. Please, ask them to bring me an animal to slaughter. I shall return the debt if I do not die before.

—Go home By the evening you will have a big sheep. But you should not return the sheep. Don't waste your time worrying!—Kuyruchuk calmed the old woman and sent her home. He then saddled his horse and rode to Mergen's house. Sitting on his horse he shouted:

—Hey, Mergen, come here! Come out of your house! Mergen came out. Seeing Kuyruchuk he became agitated.

—Shame on you, Mergen! If you were really a *mergen* [a hunter] you would hunt mountain goats in Sandik instead of hunting sheep in the village at night. You have stolen the old woman's sheep and eaten it. One part of the carcass is still hidden under your floor. Let it be hidden. Don't steal from now on. In the evening when your flock comes home you must bring a gray sheep to old Apal. Apologize to her! —Kuyruchuk said and rode away.

30. What, Jumash!

Kuyruchuk was on his way to Kochkor and had already passed Ichke-Kizart when he met a man whose name was Joldosh.

—Kuke, it looks as if there will be a storm today in Kizart. The wind is getting stronger; it is beginning to blow from the opposite direction. You will not be able to go down from the Kochkor side. Stay for the night at our place.

He led him to his home, treated him kindly, and observed all the rules of hospitality. In the morning when Kuyruchuk was about to saddle his horse, Jumash told him the secret that was troubling him.

—I have no son. I don't want my yurt to remain empty Shall I ever have a son? Bless me!

—A good dream is half a blessing! I don't begrudge you my blessing. Next year your wife will bear a son. However, I make this condition: don't hurry to give him a name. I will come and name him myself. —He blessed him, saddled his horse, and left.

Days and nights went by, weeks, months passed, the appointed period was over. The day came when Jumash heard his child cry. Overcome with joy, he had a big celebration organized, forgetting the promise he had made to Kuyruchuk. “Thanks to Kuke's blessing, God has given me a son. May he be like him and serve the people.” He gave his son the name Kuyruchuk. Kuyruchuk arrived at the appointed time. Jumash welcomed him with much hospitality.

—Jumash, bring your child, we shall name him.—Kuyruchuk ordered. Jumash turned red and, bowing his head, he said:

—Kuke, I have named him Kuyruchuk in the hope that he will become a man of the people.

—What, Jumash! —He exclaimed with regret. I warned you! Now your son will grow up lacking an organ. But his life will be long! —Having said this, he saddled his horse and left. Indeed, the child's nose turned out defective. Kuyruchuk, son of Jumash, still lives in Kizart village.

31. Three Times You Will Go to Hell

Sheraldī was appointed chairman of the collective farm. Soon after this, to celebrate his appointment and to receive the *aksakals'* blessing, he slaughtered a mare. On the river bank in the Tuura-Terek ravine, the meat was being cooked in large cauldrons, and large quantities of *kumis* and *bozo* were offered. Suddenly a horseman appeared on the horizon.

—Who can it be? Obviously no one of our people, the horse does not belong to us. The guests were wondering. They watched the horseman approach and when he was quite near they recognized Kuyruchuk. Sheraldī ran up to him, took the bridle of his horse, and helped him to dismount. Kuyruchuk sat with the people, drinking *kumis* and explaining that he was on his way to Ketmen-Tobe to do business. As he was preparing to leave, people persuaded him to try some of the meat that was still cooking.

—Well, all right! he agreed. —It is impossible to leave a meal which is just about ready. I should also like to talk to your chairman, he said, looking at Sheraldī.

After they had eaten, he addressed Sheraldī:

—Chairman, listen to me! It is very well that you wish to receive the *aksakals'* blessing. But it will not be accepted. Because you have slaughtered an old mare that was not yours, but belonged to the collective farm. Whatever belongs to the collective farm belongs to the people. You will go to hell three times. Don't take offense! —He mounted his horse and rode away.

—Everything that Kuyruchuk predicted has come true, you see. You know that I was sent to prison three times. —said Sheraldī.

(From the stories of the old man Sheraldī, from Ornok village in the Jumgal region)

32. Kuyruchuk and the Judge

Jumgal and Kochkor were united under Stalin's name. Citizens of Jumgal often came to the Jumgal District Center to settle their affairs. All the officials were working in Jumgal.

One day some officials began to talk about poets and writers, and soon they were talking about Kuyruchuk's sense of humor and oratory skills. One of them mentioned his talent for predictions.

—I believe that Kuyruchuk has supernatural powers. There has been much talk about it. If he wants to take something he can do it, and he takes neither less nor more than what he had asked for. He always shares everything he has with poor people. He can even guess what each person has in his house, in his yard, in his pocket . . .

—Don't tell tales!—The judge said.—How can he guess what a person has in his pocket? Besides, the idea that he can take everything he wants cannot be right either. If I don't want to give anything, then I do not give it. How can he take it? But it was obvious that he didn't know Kuyruchuk. They bet a horse on it.

It was an autumn day. One of the *jigits* who had taken part in the argument was going to his office and suddenly saw Kuyruchuk sitting at the bus-stop, surrounded by people who were listening to his stories and laughing. The *jigit* came up and asked:

—Kuke, when are you leaving? In three days. —He answered.

The *jigit* summoned all the participants of the argument and told Kuyruchuk about the bet.

—Introduce me to the judge! —said Kuyruchuk, and the *jigits* shouted that the judge was already on his way. The judge came up to the crowd and greeted the men. Kuyruchuk addressed him:

—Hey, *jigit*, why are you walking here like a Chui guard? Give me ten *soms*! The "*jigit*" turned red in the face and began to search for money in his pocket.

—Hey, *jigit*, look in the breast pocket of your shirt, inside your passport.—Kuke prompted him, smiling. The judge looked in his right breast pocket and he found ten *soms* in his passport.

—Take it, *aksakal*. —He stretched out his hand in haste.

Kuyruchuk chose a boy in the crowd who was wearing a coat over his naked body. He handed him the money and said:

—Buy two shirts and some sugar for your mother's tea. The *jigits* asked the judge:

—Why didn't you refuse to give him your money?

—I don't remember taking out my passport and giving him the money. —the judge admitted.

In the evening he slaughtered the horse that he had lost in the bet and invited Kuyruchuk and the others for a meal.

33. The Son Will Be A Smith

My father Sulayman worked as a smith all his life. In 1916 he escaped to Turfan with some others. Having returned, he settled in the village of Tash-Dobe in his sister's house, where he continued his trade. He also built a mill in the village, making the peasants' life easier. On account of his successful business he was called Sulayman the Smith.

One day he was busy as usual in his workshop, when the news came that Kuyruchuk had taken his five-year-old son, Saginali, to a village high in the mountains. The father, unaware of Kuyruchuk's tricks, followed them on horseback. After a long search he found out that they were in the pilgrim Sagindik's house. He came into the house and greeted them. Seeing his son sitting on Kuyruchuk's knees and sucking sugar, my father, himself an orphan, was about to burst into tears.

—Well, my smith, come in! You would never have come to me yourself, but you have come because of your son Your son is mine now and you can take him if you give me a present. —Said Kuyruchuk with a smile.

—I have a young black lamb in my yard; take it. —The father offered.

—I will not take a lamb that you got for patching people's leaking buckets and pots. I will take only something that you have made with your own hands.

—Kuke, I have a knife But how can I give you only one? I had better make another one for your wife to cut noodles with.

Kuyruchuk hinted that he would leave late. Sulayman ran to his workshop and made a knife quickly and returned with the two knives for Kuyruchuk. Kuyruchuk liked the knives. He woke the sleeping boy.

—May your son have a long life! May he never know poverty, may he have many children, and may he continue your trade!—Kuyruchuk blessed him. As he was seeing them off, he sat the boy on the horse himself and said:

—Your son will be a smith, like you.

As Kuyruchuk had predicted, my brother Saginali became a good smith. Thanks to Kuyruchuk's blessing, my own son has also learned my trade and has become a smith. —The father said.

Years passed. My brother became a young *jigit*. One day he arrived from Chet-Kuugandi to Chaek on business. Having learned that Kuyruchuk was at the smith's Beynazar, he wanted to see the man who had blessed him. He went to Beynazar's.

—You must be that son of the smith —He recognized my brother at once.

—He had last seen me when I was five years old. . . . How could he recognize me?

My brother was wondering. Now Saginali is the father of nine children and he is eighty years old.

34. Janake's Story

At that time I was working as the chief of the savings bank-*aqsaqal*, Janake began his story. I rode out from Chaiek and was on my way to Kaiyrma. As I was approaching a *mazar*, for some reason Kuyruchuk came to my mind. People say that he takes everything he wishes, and his favorite targets are the bureaucrats. If I meet him and he demands something from me, I thought, I shall never give it to him It would be interesting to see what happens then. I went on thinking about it and didn't even notice how I got to the shrine. The road led to the river down a bendy slope. As I stepped into the water I saw a lonely horseman on the other side of the river, riding out of the forest. He also walked into the water and I suddenly recognized that it was none other than Kuyruchuk. We met right in the middle of the river. I greeted him, wondering how it happened that the very man whom I had been thinking about suddenly appeared. He returned the greeting and asked me without letting my hand go:

—Who are you, my son?

I answered that I was Konoy's son. He began to inquire about my father's health. Then suddenly he declared:

—Give me 15 *soms*! In fact I had exactly this amount in my pocket, and I gave him money without comprehending how it happened. Just as I was passing the shrine I collected my thoughts and was amazed at that man. I thought that he must have had a guardian angel and supernatural powers.

The *aqsaqal* Janake finished his tale.

35. Guardian Angel

The story was told by Ashirakman's son Altimish. In 1976 he was in Bagish village, situated in the Jungal region, and heard this story straight from Mukat, who was Kuyruchuk's son.

“When I was about six years old, I saw my father's guardian angel with my own eyes. The guardian angel was naked like a baby and had a long beard. My father had instructed me: ‘My son, never come in when I recite my prayers, but if you have to come in, then sit down and don't dare to fall asleep before I have finished my prayer.’ On such an occasion I saw this naked boy with a long beard playing beside him. Remembering my father's words, I sat

down slowly on the felt mat and watched him and the boy. For some reason I did not feel any fear. It seemed to me that the reciting of the prayer took a very long time; my body started to ache and my eyes were dropping. I was woken by an excruciating pain: father had hit me on the top of my head. He was standing in front of me and addressed me angrily:

‘You will not become a second Kuyruchuk! Everything is over, you will live an ordinary life.’ He struck my head and left.”

36. My Road Leads Me Far From Here, I Won’t Be Back

Despite his advanced years, Kuyruchuk did not lose his strength and courage. His mind was as sharp as ever and he could saddle up his horse like a young man, without any effort. His speech retained its simplicity. Throughout his life he never lost his insight and good qualities.

He foresaw his approaching death even though he was not ill or bedridden. On the day of his death Kuyruchuk got up earlier than usual, mounted his horse, and set off around the village. One of his neighbors saw him and asked:

—Hey, Kuke, where are you going at the crack of dawn?

—I’m starting on a distant journey, he answered, far from here.

—Far from here? Are you perhaps leaving for Moscow?

—No, my road leads me further than Moscow, I won’t be back.

That day he visited all his neighbors, relatives, and the village elders, people who enjoyed his respect. They welcomed him and he joked a lot as usual. Taking his leave, he said:

—Goodbye! I have called on you to say goodbye. I’m going away

—Where are you going? his friends asked.

—My road leads me further away than Moscow, I won’t come back.

Having visited all his friends, Kuyruchuk returned home in the evening. It was time for the evening prayer. He asked his wife to fetch him the prayer rug. He started his prayer, but then fell on the rug and never stood up again.

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