

The Triad of Crime, Punishment, and Forgiveness in the Kyrgyz Epic *Kojojash*

The epic *Kojojash* is considered one of the “lesser” Kyrgyz epics, a term used to denote its small size when compared to the great epic *Manas*, which has roughly half a million lines. Perhaps more importantly, *Manas* telling and tellers played an exclusive role in traditional Kyrgyz society and it held a special place among Kyrgyz folk works. Other epic folk poems are therefore somewhat affectionately termed *kenje*, meaning both “junior” and “lesser,” even though they average about ten thousand lines (Aytmatov 1996:6) and are hardly small compared to the epics of other peoples.

The composition of some of these poems—including *Er Teshtyuk* and *Kojojash*—appears to be roughly contemporaneous with that of *Manas*. Semantic features of *Kojojash* allow scholars to place its composition in ancient times and determine its archaic nature, even though its story of a bold hunter has neither disappeared with time nor faded away with the past. Instead, it has attracted considerable interest among contemporary writers and artists, as witnessed by Tolomush Okeev’s 1985 film *Ak ilbirstin tukumu* [The descendant of the snow leopard], stories such as “Ak keme” (“The white steamboat”) by Chingiz Aytmatov (1980, 1986) and “Kojojash mergen” (“Kojojash the hunter”) by K. Jusubaliyev (1991), novels such as Aytmatov and Shahanov’s 1996 *Askada kalgan anchynyn yiyi* [Q: Can you supply a translation of this title? Also, do you have a first name for Shahanov?], and plays such as *Bayirki jomok* (“An ancient fairy tale”) by Mar Baijiev (1975) and *Kereez* (“The last will”) by T. Osmonov.¹ [Q: First name for Osmonov?] This list of recent creative variations on this ancient epic raises the question of why it remains so attractive in contemporary Kyrgyz society and why it is used over and over again. This article is an attempt to rethink the ancient story and highlight some possible reasons for its continued relevance.

Basic Plot

Kojojash is a most skillful hunter whose ability is expressed with the formula *көзгө атаар мерген*, [hunter who shoots in the (prey’s) eye]. Because hunters usually look to harvest animal skins as well as meat, a good hunter aims for the eye of the prey so as not to harm its skin. Kojojash is tireless and very successful in what he does. Thanks to his successful hunting, Kojojash provides abundantly for his kin and enjoys their praise.

One day he meets Kayberen (the Goat, also known as Sur Ečki), accompanied by her large family. Kojojash shoots all her kids with deadly precision. When he comes to the parents, Kayberen humbly begs Kojojash to have mercy on her and Alabash, the father of the deceased kids, so that they can go elsewhere and give birth to new offspring, thereby preserving their lineage. Kojojash laughs at the “silly” Goat, who dares to ask him, the Great Hunter, for mercy:

Билдим сөздүн чамасын. Менден текени сурап аласың, нзүң кайда барасың, Колуңдан келсе жутуп кой, Карыптын жалгыз баласын [I understood the meaning of your words. You hope to make me spare the He-Goat’s life. But where can you escape from me? If you can, try and swallow me, the only son of Karypbai!].

Having thus mocked her, Kojojash then cruelly kills Alabash in front of the eyes of the unfortunate She-Goat.

This young and strong hunter who never missed his prey is sure that the Goat will also be easy prey for him, but it does not work out according to his plans: the old Goat swears to take vengeance on the hunter, and finds justice by luring Kojojash onto a steep and rocky precipice from which he cannot find his way down and from which, in his desperation, he eventually jumps.

Two realities: Life and epic

The historical basis for this epic seems to be the simple tale of a young and hot-blooded hunter who follows his prey and in his excitement falls off a steep and slippery rock. This simple story, devoid of any other context, would be a common enough occurrence in the life of ancient hunters. Hunting was the basic trade which fed Kojojash's kin or tribe. Since hunting and gathering were among the earliest forms of human activity, conflict between a person and an animal could appear in many cultures. At some point, however, the basic story of a hunter's death moved from reality to the world of imagination to yield the first epic poem of *Kojojash*. With subsequent changes, it developed into the epic that we now have preserved in the different versions of Tolomush Jeentayev, Sulaiman Konokbayev, and Alymkul Usenbayev.²

Because variability is one of main peculiarities of verbal folklore (Propp 1955:21, Anikin 1987:53–64), Russian folklorists such as Vladimir Propp and Vladimir Anikin believed that it was necessary to take all variants and versions of a work into account in order to recover the “folk conception in all its integrity and creative value” (Propp 1955:21). Every separate variant, according to Propp, is a “private case of the realization of a conception.” [Q:

What is the source for this quote?]

As an aid in understanding the “folk conception” of the people who created *Kojojash*, the main characteristics in each of the three written variants at our disposal are identified as follows (J = Jeentayev, K = Konokbayev, U = Usenbayev): [Q: **Can you say anything about where these variants came from within Kyrgyzstan? Would it be possible to supply a map showing where they came from? Note as well that we had to change the format of the plot comparisons because the final journal page is physically too small to accommodate the table format.]**

Location:

- J: Talas (upper Karakol)
- K: Talas (upper Karakol)
- U: Uch-Kemin (Kok-Oirok)

Ancestry of Kojojash:

- J: Kojojash is a commoner of the Kytai kin. Father: Karypbay. Mother: Biikech.
- K: From a noble family of the Kytai kin. Father: Arypbay. Mother: Akerkech.
- U: From a noble family. The names of his kin or parents are not mentioned.

Beginning:

- J: Zulayka chooses a groom.
- K: Childhood of Kojojash. Learns hunting, sees Kayberen in his dream.
- U: Troubling dreams of Kayberen.

Wedding:

- J: Zulayka chooses Kojojash to be her husband. The hunter gets married and takes her to his land.
- K: Kojojash is already married to Zulayka.
- U: Kojojash has a fiancé named Kermekash.

Prophetic dreams:

- J: Kojojash has a prophetic dream and tells Zulayka and the elders of the kin about the dream. Zulayka interprets the dreams as a bad omen. The elders also interpret it as a bad omen.
- Kayberen has a dream and tells it to Alabash. She asks him to change pasture in order to avoid meeting the

hunter.

K: Kojojash has a prophetic dream and tells Zulayka and the elders of the kin about the dream. Zulayka interprets the dreams as a bad omen, but the elders interpret it as a good omen.

Kayberen has a dream and tells it to Alabash. She asks him to change pasture in order to avoid meeting the hunter.

U: Kayberen has a dream and tells it to Alabash. She asks him to change pasture in order to avoid meeting the hunter.

Encounter with Kayberen:

J: Kayberen asks Kojojash to spare the life of Alabash and allow them to leave for a distant land.

K: Kayberen asks Kojojash to spare the life of Alabash and allow them to leave for a distant land.

U: —

Kojojash's response:

J: Kojojash cuts off the head of Alabash in front of Kaybaren.

K: Kojojash cuts off the head of Alabash in front of Kaybaren.

U: —

Oath/curse:

J: The hunter and the Goat swear to kill one another.

K: Kayberen puts a curse on the hunter and his family and swears revenge.

U: Kayberen puts a curse on the hunter.

Kojojash's last departure:

J: In the spring Kayberen comes to Kojojash's village to seek revenge. She lures the hunter out of the village.

K: In the spring Kayberen comes to Kojojash's village to seek revenge. She lures the hunter out of the village.

U: —

Prophetic dream:

J: —

K: —

U: Kojojash's father has a dream and interprets it as a bad omen.

Kojojash pursues Kayberen:

J: Kojojash repeatedly attempts to catch and shoot Kayberen.

K: Kojojash repeatedly attempts to catch and shoot Kayberen.

U: —

Search for Kojojash:

J: Very worried, Zulayka starts to search for Kojojash. His kin also tirelessly seek him.

K: Zulayka finds out from the White Book that Kojojash remained among the rocks [**Q: What is the White Book?**]

U: —

Kayberen's revenge:

J: In desperation, Kojojash jumps off the rock.

K: In desperation, Kojojash jumps off the rock.

U: In desperation, Kojojash jumps off the rock.

After Kojojash's death

J: Zulayka is pregnant with a child.

K: Zulayka is pregnant with a child. The last wish of Kojojash was to name the child Moldojash.

K: In misery, Kermekash kills herself with a knife.

Birth of a son

J: Moldojash is born.

K: —

U: —

Son's search for his father's body:

J: After a long search, Moldojash finds and buries the body of his father.

K: —

U: —

Union of Kayberen's and Kojojash's kin

J: Moldojash marries Kayberen's daughter and returns to his kin with his wife.

K: —

U: —

This comparison shows that Usenbayev provides the fullest version of the *Kojojash* tale (Kyrbashev 1996:46). Accordingly, this analysis focuses primarily on his version and makes reference to the others as needed.

Because any epic contains layers from different times, Propp maintained that “the time of the emergence of an epic is to be established based on the conflict” at its core (1955:22). The comparison given above shows that the face-off of Kojojash and Kayberen is the central conflict in this epic. To a certain extent hunting is always a struggle or face-off and in this respect the case of Kojojash and the Goat is typical of everyday hunting life. However the emphasis of previous generations of Kyrgyz on this story, and its consequent transformation from an account of ordinary life to an imaginative epic, have furnished it with extraordinary depth and meaning.

It is this conflict between hunter and animal that is characteristic of ancient epic and demonstrates the archaic nature of *Kojojash*. Man and animal are in a dramatic fight for their rights, just as man and man have been throughout history. For this reason the Goat is one of the two main characters of the epic.

Kojojash prior to the meeting with Kayberen

The following portion of Usenbayev's text describes Kojojash before his encounter with Kayberen.

Мергендигине айла жок,
Карыптын жалгыз баласы,
Мылтык жакка калганда,
Артык мунун чамасы.
Айлына турбайт күнүгө,
Жүргөнү тоонун арасы.
Күнүгө кийик этин жеп,
Элинин тынган санаасы.
Кытайлардын Кожожаш,
Төө таман мерген – деп,
Төгөрөктү көргөн – деп.
Алача туяк, жез билек,
Аты мергенге ылайык.
Адам жүрбөс аскада,
Аралап жүрөт эрбеждеп

[There is no limit to the might of the hunter,
The only son of Karyp,
If one is to speak about his rifle,

There's no limit to its might as well.
 The place of his life is the mountains.
 The hunter's people are happy:
 Not a day without fresh meat.
 Kojojash, from the Kytai tribe—
 The hunter—camel foot.
 He has seen the world all around.
 His mighty hoof, copper foot,
 And his horse suits him just fine.
 He **passes easily**
 Through **rocks impassible to humans.**]

If one compares the description Kojojash's appearance in the different variants, it is easy to see similarities. Having studied the instincts of his prey, having learned their speed and habits, Kojojash starts to look somewhat like them. His degree of adaptation to the mountains, stamina, skill, and physical strength all combine to make Kojojash similar to what he hunts. Even his clothes mark Kojojash as a son of the mountains or nature rather than a typical human: Кийгени кийик териси [He wears skins of goats, deer], or Мергенде, киши көрчү кийим жок, Чарыгы бутта табылган, Белдиги белде чалынган, Тегерек кисе, кутуда, Ок, дары баары салынган [The hunter wears barely any clothes. His feet are wrapped in skins. He has a cloth around his waist].

Kojojash spends little time with other people: he comes amongst them to deliver his prey and leaves again. Although the epic variants provide his tribe or kinship affiliation, this information is a mandatory element of the traditional epic and its role in the further story is of little significance: it is irrelevant whether Kojojash comes from a poor or a rich kin group (in some versions he comes from a rich group and in some he comes from a poor one) or whether he comes from a large or small family. The only relevant factor is that Kojojash is human and represents the people. This underdevelopment of social facets is yet another feature that is characteristic of archaic epic.

Kojojash is thus like those he hunts and he lives more among them than among people. He is on a border that simultaneously connects and divides the human and animal worlds. It is on account of his position that Kojojash has a special mission in ancient Kyrgyz epic. To use Levi-Strauss' term, his is a "mediator mission." **[Q: Can you supply a source for this quote?]** The fate of the epic hero depends on the level of his readiness, or lack thereof, to fulfill his mission.

Marriage as the First Deheroization of the Hunter.

Hunting is the essence and meaning of life for Kojojash. Only one circumstance distracts the hero for a certain period of time, his marriage (to Zulayka in Usenbayev's version). The motif of match-making and marriage is resolved in *Kojojash* in a most untraditional way and it is important to consider it carefully.

Traditionally in both Kyrgyz epic and Kyrgyz society, the groom or his representatives go out to look for a bride. In the epic world (not just in Kyrgyz epic) the official initiative usually comes from the male, so much so that Propp concluded that the main plot of the ancient Russian epic "was about finding a bride" (1955:108).

In this Kyrgyz epic, however, the hero does not even think about looking for a wife. Zulayka, a beautiful girl and the daughter of a wealthy man, announces that she is looking for a husband herself. It is not the groom but the bride who is seeking a partner. Although one might be tempted to see signs of a matriarchal order in this instance, Zulayka is not self-sufficient and does not try to build her life without any masculine participation. Instead Zulayka's beauty is "substantiated" by the wealth and power of her father.

It should be noted that the motif of marriage in *Kojojash* appears to be a relatively late addition, for it does not exist in two of the three existing versions of the epic (Jeentayev's and Konokbayev's). Due to its late introduction, the motif of marriage contrasts with the semantic core of the plot—the life of the hunter and his circle—and generates a certain amount of confusion due to its untraditional nature and lack of coherence with other components of the archaic epic. Despite these problems, Kojojash's marriage is well established in the structure of the epic, raising the question of why it is so important.

Propp demonstrated on the basis of Russian folklore classics that the “building of the epic,” i.e., the introduction of new elements into an old structure, happens in strict compliance with the rules of the genre. Meletinsky expresses the same thought concerning the aesthetic norms of folklore:

At the same time the narrator, while orienting himself towards samples of the style known to him, knowledge of the plot and poetic lexis, separate formulas etc., reproduces first of all certain poetic structures (on all levels), staying strictly within a symbolic modeling system. (1998:43)

Consequently, according to the laws of the genre (or its symbolic modeling), the later motif of Kojojash’s marriage has to contribute to the same thoughts and themes as are found in the archaic core of the epic.

Turning to the text, how does Kojojash get married? Rich, clever, and beautiful Zulayka announces that she is searching for her future husband. Many contenders, equally attractive as she is, come:

Жыйналыптыр калбастан,
Уккан элдин арасы,
Барса чуу-чуу көпчүлүк,
Каракожонун калаасы,
Бетине парда кийинип,
Белгилүү кызыл алма алып,
Сынап турат келгенди,
Зулайка сындуу баласы

No one was left aside,
All the people gathered then,
Who had heard the news at the time.
Full was the city Karakojo, city of Zulayka’s father,
Having covered her face with a yashmak [veil],
A symbolic red apple in her hands,
With a scrutinizing stare,
Zulayka looks at all who come.

However none of these suitors receives Zulayka’s interest. Only one late-comer, Kojojash, who has kept to the side and seemed to have appeared against his will (his relatives asked him to visit the match-making), and who did not show off, attracts the attention of the girl. Zulayka chooses him, the “wild” hunter in sandals made of animal skins and Kojojash is thus chosen by his future wife. This manifestation of female initiative and the woman’s choice of the groom are untraditional in the epic marriage motif.

After the marriage the epic returns to its usual path: Kojojash takes his wife to his family and lives with her in his tribe. He is so happy that he forgets about hunting for three years. Only the unhappiness of the elders, who are upset by the fact that a woman deprived them of an abundance of fresh meat, parts Kojojash and Zulayka. Kojojash, seemingly not of his own accord, goes back to hunting.

The untraditional, “upside-down” nature of the marriage motif is, of course, not an accident.³ It illuminates the shadowy features of Kojojash’s character for the first time. This inversion of the normal expectations of the genre is a powerful technique for creating doubt about the mighty hunter and his heroism: just how much of a hero is he, and is he really the only main character if he does not act and choose, but is instead summoned and selected as the husband? Here he is not a leader, but a follower, not the hunter, but the hunted. His continuing affection for Zulayka shows that the “wild” son of the mountains is not really so far away from human feelings.

However, it is neither emotion nor practical need that leads him to Zulayka. In fact no internal motivation for Kojojash’s marriage appears in the epic and no explanation for this breaking of the fundamental order of match-making and marriage is given. In order to understand his marriage one needs to identify the function of this motif in the context of other components of the epic.

Kayberen as Primal Totem Mother

The second main character of the epic is the Goat, Kayberen/Sur Ečki. In many cultures the goat is a special animal (Darkevitch 1988: 108, Ferber 2002:86), usually on account of her fertility or maternal essence. In Usenbayev's version the Goat has seventy kids and in Konokbayev's version she is called Мин улактуу Эчки 'She-goat that has a thousand kids,' demonstrating that Kayberen means "Giving life." **[Q: Does this mean that the word *Kayberen* means 'giving life' or that she represents a life giver? It is not clear if this is an etymological assertion or a symbolic one.]**

A popular belief of the Kyrgyz about Kayberen, the sacred primogenitor, places the genesis of humans in the type of animal known as *kiyik*. Kiyiks are animals such as goats, deer, wild rams, and elk that have cloven hooves and an even number of toes. Two large Kyrgyz tribes, the *Bugu* (deer) and *Sarybagysh* (elk), use kiyiks as their totems.

In Usenbayev's variant the three main characters Kojojash, Kayberen, and Zulayka simultaneously have the same dream: Kojojash meets the family of the Goat and kills every single one of them except for the Goat herself, the Goat swears revenge, revenge takes place, and Kojojash perishes. Such a prophetic dream is called an *ayan*, usually translated as "omen," which conveys the meaning quite well. The story of Kojojash – "dream in circles" **[Q: What does "dream in circles" refer to?]**– highlights the original meaning of this word, "be careful, show caution, beware" (a literary translation of the word *ayan* as imperative of the verb *aeo* 'feel sorrow, sympathy'). **[Q: Some of our readers were confused as to how "be careful" can come from "feel sorrow, sympathy". Is there some explanation you can provide?]**

The Kyrgyz epic, in the spirit of classical tragedy, "forces the characters to know" **[Q: Is this a quote from Propp?]** about the tragedy before it takes place. Propp describes the difference between the tragedy of Sophocles and similar folkloric materials in "Oedipus in the Light of Folklore" and notes that "Sophocles [makes] the main character know about [the prophecy and thus] furnishes the plot with a tragic meaningfulness. If Oedipus did not know about the prophecy, it would be a tragic accident, as . . . usually happens in fairy tales" (1976:263).

Propp's distinction is particularly relevant if one takes the role of then *ayan* in the traditional Kyrgyz culture into account: such dreams were uttered carefully, thought over, and interpreted in a special custom called *tyosh joruu*. People believed this custom to be of great importance because the correct interpretation of dreams somehow established a bridge between the world of dreams and the world of real events and actions. In contrast to the "weak connection between the prophecy and internal, psychological and external, compositional structure of the plot" that Propp noted in the epic material about Oedipus (263), this connection is very strong in *Kojojash*.

Let us examine the behavior of the characters after they see the *ayan*: Kaybaren, having received this terrible message, undertakes all actions possible to avoid meeting the mighty hunter, but the He-Goat Alabash ignores her fears and continues with his ordinary life. Zulayka tries to talk the hunter out of this hunt and keep him by her side, but Kojojash ignores Zulayka's fears and goes hunting anyway. In these situations the epic's opposition of female and male characteristics becomes clear in terms of feminine anxiety and care versus male carelessness, and feminine heeding of presentiment versus male neglect of warnings.

Kaybaren, who fails to persuade Alabash to leave the dangerous place, does not avoid her tragic encounter. Her conduct during this meeting is first of all the behavior of a wife and a mother, as given in Usenbayev's version:

Айтылуу мыкты мергеним.
Ыйлатпа мендей энеъди,
Каъгыртып жалгыз таштаба,
Кайгырып жүрүп өлөмбү.
Картайса да таштап кет,
Карыса да калжактап,
Кашымда жолдош немемди.
Сен да, жалгыз элеъ атадан,
Капалык түбү көрбөссүң,
Кайберен берген батадан.

Уругум таза кырыпсыъ,
Аска таштын башында,
Калдыбы деп арытып,
Мерген дагы карап турусуй.
Тилеген сөздү бериъиз,
Тийиштүү болсо кебибиз.
Тирүү жалгыз мен калдым,
Тилегеним Алабаш
Калбасын ээн жерибиз. . . .

My glorious and mighty hunter,
Do not make me cry,
Me, who could be your mother.
Don't leave me lonely in this world,
Because I'll die of loneliness and sadness.
He's old—leave him to me,
To be my companion.
I know you are the only son of your father.
You will know no sadness in life
Till the end of your days,
Having received my blessing—
The blessing of Kayberen.
You exterminated all my children,
All my kin,
But are insatiable even now.
You are looking, who else is left.
But I wish for and beg you for one thing only:
I am the only one who stayed alive—
Hunter, leave Alabash to me,
Let my kin continue,
Don't let our land become empty.

In the epic's text a great emphasis is placed on the humility and maternal patience of the Goat. She does not immediately decide to take vengeance, but instead makes her decision only after her begging and pleading have been arrogantly denied and Kojojash has cut off Alabash's head in front of her eyes in order to demonstrate his full superiority. Later, when he is trapped on the dangerous rock and is unable to continue the chase, Kojojash shoots at Kayberen one last time, and thus he finally destroys the bridge to possible salvation.

Consider Kayberen's alternate name, Sur Eçki. This name is usually translated as "Gray Goat," based on *sur*'s common meaning of 'gray.' However, another meaning of *sur* is 'spirit,' or 'soul' (10, 665) [Q: **This reference is missing in what you sent...**]. This second meaning is found in such expressions as *suru kachty*, *suru ketti* 'to get scared, look badly' (literally, 'sur has run away, sur has left') and *surundan aylanayin* 'my dear' (literally, 'I should turn your sur around,' that is, 'to become a round protection for you' [Q: **We are not sure what 'to become a round protection for you' means.**]).

Such expressions, especially in the context of *Kojojash*, demonstrate a sacral meaning of *sur*: it is someone or something in humans that provides them with well-being and protects them from hardships and sorrows. Whether translated as "soul" or "fate," it is a sacral force that accompanies a person. Based on these meanings and characteristics it is apparent that Sur Eçki in the ancient epic is none other than the Face of Fate, who is not recognized by the young and successful hunter. It was not by accident that Sur Eçki tells Kojojash that she could bring both immense success and irremediable grief, but he does not recognize her position as master.

These aspects of the two faces of the Goat—Kayberen as mother and Sur Eçki as Fate—merge together. She is the original mother of the nation (i.e., its immortal soul) as well as the face of its fate, in this case of a retributive fate.

The Roots of Conflict

The prophecy comes true: Kojojash exterminates the Goat's family and the Goat brings about Kojojash's demise. The most ancient law of vendetta comes into force and the cycle is closed. The Goat tries to avoid meeting the hunter, but he searches tirelessly for the Goat. Why, having received an ayan warning to be careful, does Kojojash, unlike the Greek Oedipus, not try to avoid his tragic fate? Why, instead of demonstrating caution, does he rush towards disaster? Why is he so cruel and merciless?

The name of the hero is central to the semantics of Kyrgyz epic. Just as the name Sur Ečki is important, Kojojash's name reveals much about his role and character. Kojojash was a hunter who never missed. The words that Kayberen told Alabash, "Кыйын деп сырттан укчу элем. . ." [I hear he is a mighty hunter], are the words of the rumors of the people. **[Q: Does this last passage mean that they are quoting a previously quoted rumor in the epic, or is this your interpretation of the words?]**

Kojojash has mastered the science of hunting to such an extent that no one doubts his superiority, not even his prey, the Goat. He himself has no doubts. He has mastered the mountains, valleys, and forests in which he hunts to such an extent that they seem to be his property. The first part of the name of the hero, *kojo* (*kojoyun* in its full form) means "master." His dream concerning Kayberen questions his "mastership," and the personality of the hero is such that he takes the ayan as a challenge rather than a warning.

The second part of his name, *jash*, has several meanings: "young," "years," and "tears." The combination *kojo* + *jash* can thus mean "young master," "(man) of a master's age," or "master's tear/master of tears." Meanings related to youth in particular appear in the epic associated with such attributes as *strong*, *confident*, *careless*, and *risky*. (Каруудан тайбай күч алып, Кайраттанып жалтылдап, Алты сайлуу Ак бараъ, Оь ийнинде жаркылдап, Кисеси белде шаркылдап. Табына келген күлүктөй, Талпынып мерген шарпылдап **[Q: Can you provide translations for these phrases?]**).

Kojojash does not run away from the tragedy because he does not believe, or does not want to believe, in its possible realization. His attitude concerning the ayan and the Goat is mirrored in Alabash's response to the ayan and his ignoring the Goat's fear and anxiety. Young Kojojash's confidence in his superiority, and old Alabash's confidence about his safety, represent the same sort of behavior in a crisis situation.

The young master Kojojash ruthlessly pursues and exterminates the Goat's family in order to put an end to his doubts and demonstrate who is who once and for all. In this action even the thin line between murder and hunting disappears and hunting turns into murder: the young hunter crosses the legitimate bounds of his trade and becomes a criminal and murderer rather than a hunter. His pursuit of the Goat is no longer a simple exercise in searching for and pursuing his prey, but rather, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's terms, the fight between the "right having" and the "trembling creature." **[Q: What work of Dostoyevsky's do these phrases occur in? The first is unclear in its English meaning.]**

Thus what initially appears to be a natural fight between hunter and prey is interpreted by the Kyrgyz people in the extreme situation found in the epic as a face-off of a much more complex nature. The Goat is Kayberen, the primal mother. It is not accidental that the epic emphasizes similarity between hunter and hunted. Kojojash's failure to recognize Kayberen as mother and his murder of kin trespass against the basic foundations of life.

Recall that Kojojash had already broken one of the basic traditions in his betrothal and marriage and that here too he acts in violation of traditional expectations. The same lack of traditionalism and the "incorrectness" seen in his marriage is even more evident in Kojojash's dealings with the Goat. Using the methodology and the terminology of the structural-semiotic method, one can say that the motif of marriage and the motif of the conflict in *Kojojash* are "functional blocks" or "semantic codes, conveying [messages similar to each other] by means of language of description, taken from different spheres of human experience and the surrounding life" (Meletinsky 1998:34).

Kojojash's Doom

Kojojash's concern for himself, which leads him to destroy the fundamentals of life and to step over the feelings and rights of the Mother and parent, is categorically unacceptable in people's conscience. Ancient Kyrgyz phrases such

as the farewell ак сүтүмдү акта 'justify my milk' or 'justify the labor that I invested into you,' the thanks ак сүтүмдү актады '[you have] justified my milk,' and the curse ак сүтүм урсуң 'let my milk punish you,' highlight the preeminent place of the mother as represented by her milk and show that it was considered to be a real power.

Kyrgyz thinkers, first and foremost Chingiz Aytmetov, have long held that the genius of the Kyrgyz people is manifested verbally in the epic (1996:5–9). Kojojash's death as depicted by Usenbayev is a masterful example of such verbal artistry. In it we see the young and confident master being drawn into a trap by the old and fragile Goat. Hunter and hunted trade their roles, and it is now Kojojash who rushes about the edge of the rock just as his prey previously had rushed about under his blows. At this moment the most important correlation between the situation with Zulayka and the situation with Kayberen is made manifest: in both instances Kojojash is not the leader, but the one being led; he is not master of circumstance, but rather subject to circumstances beyond his control. A fatal mistake takes a leading role and leads Kojojash to the unreachable rock where he is stranded and from whence he cannot return.

The name of the hero takes on one more meaning here on the edge of the rock: "master of tears." Trying to get their kinsman out of trouble, Kojojash's kin journey to the place where the hunter is stranded on the rock, but all their efforts are to no avail. Many tears are shed at the foot of the rock and the "young master" turns out to be the "master of tears" who has created a sea of tears and left this world in tears.

The Conflict's Multiple Meanings

The theme of crime and punishment is quite apparent in the epic. As befits the cruelty of his crime, Kojojash's punishment is severe: left with no chance for salvation, he jumps off the rock into the abyss, as though striving to reach his people at the base of the cliff and the land that he thoughtlessly left behind. His body, however, is caught on a sharp point of rock, and does not reach the ground. As a result the bold hunter Kojojash stays between sky and earth, in a place that is symbolically nowhere.

Meletinsky noted that the "symbolic multiplicity of fairy-tale and mythological motifs and images clearly expresses the richness of meaning" (1998:33). *Kojojash* substantiates this observation very well, for the conflict of Kojojash and Kayberen is loaded with many meanings. Superficially it is a struggle between a hunter and an animal and is a conflict between human beings and nature. At the same time Kojojash and the Goat represent such oppositions as youth – age, naïveté – wisdom, male – female, son – mother, profane – sacred, risk – intelligence, accident – fate, and human – god. The multiple meanings of the conflict open up opportunities for very different interpretations of the ancient plot. The well-established opinion among Kyrgyz folklore experts that *Kojojash* represents an ecological problem is based on only one of the aspects of the conflict, even though the epic provides food for thought concerning any one of the above-mentioned oppositions.

Forgiveness [Q: One of our readers suggested that "reconciliation" would be a better term than "forgiveness" since Kojojash himself is not forgiven, but it is his son that it is reconciled with Kayberen's daughter. We leave it for you to consider whether this change would be good or not.]

Among the diverse meanings discussed above, one extremely important idea of the epic is also hidden in Kojojash's name. Kojojash, by definition, is "young master" (жаш кожоюн), a young man. He committed a severe crime and suffered what may be the most severe punishment possible: he made all his kin suffer and his body was not returned to the earth. However, neither the severity of the crime nor the severity of the punishment cancel forgiveness. The people who created the epic story about the mighty hunter highlight his youth and the belief that it is natural to make mistakes and take risks while young. Heedless of the warning, Kojojash fearlessly challenges higher authority. Youth is the main justification and explanation for Kojojash's tragedy.

Crime predetermines punishment, but forgiveness and understanding also play a role. It is in this connection that the last theme of the epic appears: Kojojash's son Moldojash eventually finds and buries his father's body. Moreover, Moldojash marries the daughter of Sur Ečki and thus restores the union between humans and Kayberen. In the

patriarchal world of the epic marriage is a type of power and by marrying the Goat's daughter Moldojash asserts the human's right to power.

Moldojash means "a knowledgeable young (man), an educated or literate youth." The meaning of this name is certainly related to the tragic experience of *Kojojash*: according to the logic of the Kyrgyz storytellers, *Moldojash* is taught through the bitter fate of his father. Desire for power and confidence in it led the young hunter to the edge of the forbidding rock, but his understanding of power and dominance turned out to be dead-end. *Moldojash*, however, finds a way out of this dead end and retains power. The main lesson for the son in his father's tragedy is that power cannot be thoughtless, unlimited, or uncontrolled. *Moldojash* has become what *Kojojash* failed to become: a mediator.

However, to a certain extent, the idea of the forgiveness of *Kojojash* has another paradoxical explanation in the nature of the power itself. Power is one of a person's biggest temptations and few can resist the temptation of unlimited power. Inasmuch as the relationship between the Goat and *Kojojash* reflects the form of ancient society, the behavior of the hunter is the behavior of a person in that society who has tasted unlimited power. He went too far and became too bold or haughty, as did many famous and not-so-famous tyrants, both great and small, in later times. *Kojojash* stumbled in the test of great power.

In this regard it is perhaps not too farfetched to see the Kyrgyz hunter as the epic ancestor of Nietzsche's and Dostoyevsky's "Superman." The Kyrgyz attitude to such a type of a person can be recognized in the drastic form of the hero's cruel death (murder/suicide).

Conclusion

At the very beginning of this article I posed the question of why this story is so attractive and why it is revived again and again. My belief is it is because humanity keeps thinking over the same questions and repeatedly faces the same problems that are described in this ancient folk story. The question of overstepping or trespassing the edge of what is permissible is one such question.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that it is not an opposition of crime and punishment in *Kojojash*, but rather a triad of crime, punishment, and forgiveness. Opposition is, by its very nature, confrontational and given to sharp contrasts, rigidity, and cruelty. A triad, on the other hand, is an alternative to opposition and confrontation. Triads open up the possibility of development, rethinking of ideas, and reevaluation of events and facts. A triad is thus more humane and human-oriented than a binary opposition.

It is an orientation towards the human that characterizes the lesser Kyrgyz epics. All Kyrgyz epics are named after their main heroes. In this way Kyrgyz epic may compensate for a lack of attention to the individual in the tribal lifestyle. *Kojojash* shows that a person is entrusted with many things and that he is responsible for his own actions just as much as any superior force is. Moreover, any superior forces will only "play" that game with him for which he is prepared. The original Kyrgyz sense of religiosity is greatly influenced by the central place of humans in this world and by the degree of responsibility placed on them.

All later variants of *Kojojash* have a clear moralistic character. This moral focus is logical because the epic is born from moral concerns. *Kojojash*'s story of a bold hunter vividly illustrates the development of such a moral. It is born out of the strict pragmatic idea that rational treatment of the surrounding world and maintenance of harmony and balance are necessary for survival: if *Kojojash* had taken only what he needed, and not overstepped the requirements of his occupation as a hunter, he would not have suffered such a bitter end. The problems associated with such overstepping of need are the source of the primary commandment: "thou shall not kill." Through such moral rules otherwise destructive forces and power are controlled.

The death of the ancient hunter *Kojojash* serves as a moral seed from which morals are born and gives rise to the "educated" and "knowledgeable" *Moldojash*. "Thou shall not kill" is the pragmatic condition needed to survive and live. We thus at last come to the conclusion that *Kojojash* is a narrative of the biblical type. The sorts of moral truths placed in the Bible in the Judeo-Christian realm find their home in epic form among the Kyrgyz, with the lesser epics among the primary examples. Present-day studies of the lesser epics can therefore help us understand the fundamental rules of life that have helped guide the Kyrgyz people throughout their history.

Notes

1. *Kereez* was written in 1994 as a commissioned work for the Arsen Umuraliev's Bishkek City Drama Theater and staged by director Nurlan Asanbekov. Nurlan Asanbekov revived the work in 2003 for the Sahna Theater as part of a project entitled "The revival of the lesser Kyrgyz epic in the form of a nomadic theater."
2. These versions all appear in the compendium Akmatalliev and Kyrbashev's compendium *Kojash* (1996). Jeentayev's version appears on pages 223–41, Konokbayev's on pages 47–78, and Usenbayev's on pages 79–122.
3. The lesser Kyrgyz epics are full of instances in which the matchmaking tradition is broken, but in each instance the departure from tradition has a particular motivation and meaning. For example, in the epic *Oljobay and Kishimjan* three male heroes (Kuljigach, Soltobay, Oljobay) each break the norms of match-making and marriage at the same time, but there is no "unexplainable" inversion of the motif: these characters break the rules consciously for the sake of higher feelings such as paternity or love, and individual or inner motivation is evident. This is why people have a different, sympathetic attitude towards those who break or trespass the seemingly basic foundations of the life of the people.

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