

A Hero's Welcome for Semetey

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This paper will compare the welcome Semetey receives when meeting Ay-čürök in the *Semetey* versions by Maldibay Borzu uulu (*SMB*) and Tımbek Japıy uulu (*STJ*) translated in Daniel Prior's *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz epic tradition* from 2002. According to Daniel Prior, both texts were written in Kirghiz around the same time – *SMB* in 1899 and *STJ* between 1898 and 1902. *SMB* contains 6000 lines of poetry split into two *Semetey* poems that are from two different poets. *STJ* consists of 3600 lines and was published in 1925 by the Kirghiz publisher Arabayev. Comparing these two *Semetey* versions is convenient because they were written at the same time and they share an almost identical plot. To compare the welcome Semetey receives in both versions, firstly, the plot of the two versions will be summarized. Secondly, the welcome Semetey receives in both versions will be compared.

The story begins with the protagonist Semetey riding out with his two companions Kül-čoro and Kan-čoro to retrieve his gyrfalcon Ak-šumkar. The gyrfalcon was stolen by the shape-shifting woman Ay-čürök to lure Semetey away from his wife Čačkey. Ay-čürök is in danger to be taken as booty by Čın-kojo, who is besieging her father Akun Khan's city to take her as his wife. She wants Semetey to come after her to get his gyrfalcon back and hopes he will break the siege in the process. When Semetey and his companions get close to Akun Khan's city they rest near a mountain; Semetey climbs it and looks ahead with his telescope. He sees Ay-čürök and her maids outside of the city and sends his companion Kül-čoro to see if they are who he thinks they are. Kül-čoro takes Semetey's armor, weapons, and horse Tay-buurul (to look good and travel safely) and leaves. Separating Semetey and his companions from the maids is a raging river that they have to cross to reach them. Kül-čoro gets to the river and cannot turn back in front of the maids because that would be shameful and crosses it, albeit with some trouble. When Semetey follows Kül-čoro and gets to the river, Kan-čoro suggests to look for a ford or stay for the day. Semetey cannot take the shame of not crossing, especially since Kül-čoro successfully crossed before him. Thus he decides to plunge into the river, taking all the horses with him. After almost drowning – Kül-čoro took his good horse – and being saved by ancestral spirits, Semetey rides up to Ay-čürök and her maids to speak to them.

In the *SMB* version (Prior, p. 313-315), Ay-čürök watches Semetey cross the river and says he will not make it. Kül-čoro tells her Semetey is strong and protected by spirits, just as he is helped out of the water by them. Ay-čürök then goes to greet Semetey, addressing him as "my lord" and bringing him *arak*. Because Kül-čoro has retrieved Semetey's gyrfalcon Ak-šumkar, Semetey wants to leave as that is what he came for. Ay-čürök explains to him that they were betrothed by their fathers before they were born and that she has been waiting for him to find her. They make a plan to go to Ay-čürök's

father's city to be safe from her suitor Čın-kojo, ready a large yurt, and Semetey and Ay-čürök go to bed together.

The *STJ* version of these events (Prior, p. 330-332), Ay-čürök and her maids laugh at Semetey, who almost drowned, "until they wet their pants." Then, Semetey scolds Kül-čoro for not inviting Ay-čürök to his lands and not coming to greet him. Ay-čürök tells him that, regardless of what he may say, she has a man (Čın-kojo). Angrily, Semetey demands his gyrfalcon back and asks why he would even marry her, as she is old and has white hair. Ay-čürök tells him, as in *SMB*, that their fathers betrothed them before their birth and she waited for Semetey because she honors them. If he wants Ak-šumkar back, he will have to fight her for it. One of Ay-čürök's maids intervenes, calms her down, and tells her to serve Semetey *arak*. She does this and together with Semetey goes to her father Akun Khan's city because out on the steppe Čın-kojo might attack them.

Both *Semetey* versions have elements in common. Semetey and Ay-čürök start off at odds with each other because she stole his gyrfalcon, he wants to get it back and leave. Ay-čürök, as she had a plan when stealing the bird, tells him about their betrothal. Semetey gets served *arak* in both stories, he and Ay-čürök consummate their betrothal, and they decide to go or go to Akun Khan's city for safety from Čın-kojo. The story they tell has the same beginning and arrives at the same conclusion. These parallels between the two versions suggest that they both originated from a single version of this story. The fact that they were written at about the same time supports this theory. These two versions could show the core of this *Semetey* narrative around 1900.

The way this *Semetey* narrative is delivered in *SMB* and *STJ* is very different though. In the former, Semetey is treated like a Khan or hero would expect to be treated. His companion Kül-čoro believes in him surviving the river crossing, Ay-čürök greets him, calls him "lord" and offers him a drink. She then simply explains the situation around their betrothal to Semetey. In *STJ* this is handled very differently. Ay-čürök and her maids mock Semetey after his river crossing, Ay-čürök rejects him at first because she has a suitor, Semetey is insulted and insults her back, Ay-čürök explains their betrothal, challenges Semetey to fight her and needs to be calmed down by one of her maids. Then she offers Semetey *arak*.

In *STJ* Semetey is not treated like one would expect a hero or protagonist to be treated. He is mocked, rejected, and challenged by a woman (not expected in the context of a male-dominated epic). The difference in delivery of what is essentially the same story might, at least in part, be the result of the bard's preferences and style. In oral epics, each bard tells the story in their own way and they often modify them to fit current circumstances. Considering that the *STJ* variant was recorded when Tımbek Japıy uulu was ordered to by a police chief and that the recording took place at a police station, this might explain part of the difference. These circumstances were probably far from ideal and may have led the bard to perform the epic the way he did. Because the origin of *SMB* is not known, nothing can be said about its inception.

The two versions of *Semetey* compared in this paper illustrate how a story can be told in different ways and leave different impressions. The *SMB* version lets the characters seem mature and friendly as they treat each other with respect. In *STJ*, the characters are immature because they mock each other. This changes the way the story is perceived. In *SMB*, the characters may not be perfect, but they are reasonable for who they are, while in *STJ* it does not fit that the daughter of a Khan and her maids would be this rude to Semetey, someone of high social rank. Unfortunately, the reason for why Tımbek Japıy uulu presents this *Semetey* in such a different way will probably remain a mystery.