

# A Hero's Reception in *Semetey*

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This paper will compare the use of comedy in the *Semetey* versions by Maldıbay 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, according to Daniel Prior, are from two different poets. *STJ* consists of 3600 lines and was published in 1925 by Arabayev as the first part of a series of stories that was never continued. It was recorded when the police chief of Narın ordered Tımbek Japıy uulu to perform the epic at a police station.

Comparing these *Semetey* versions is convenient because they were written at the same time and they share an almost identical plot. To investigate the use of comedy in both versions, firstly, the plot of the two versions will be summarized. Secondly, the use of comedy in both versions will be compared. Lastly, the effects of that comedy and its influence on the characters will be discussed.

The plot of *SMB* and *STJ* is not identical, but the second poem in *SMB* is very similar to *STJ*. The fundamental plot, disregarding differences in dialog and locations, is the same. 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 Čačikey. 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 get his gyrfalcon back and break the siege in the process.

After a long journey, Semetey and his companions are close to Akun Khan's city rest near a mountain. Semetey climbs the mountain to look ahead with his telescope and sees the city of Akun Khan as well as the army of Čın-kojo. He also spies Ay-čürök and her maids outside of the city. Kül-čoro volunteers to go and see who is approaching but asks for Semetey's armor, weapons, and horse Tay-buurul so he can make a good impression and travel safely. On his way to the strangers, Kül-čoro needs to cross a dangerous river and only makes it because of his excellent horse and the help of ancestral spirits. He goes to greet the maids, gives them his and Semetey's lineage and boasts of their deeds.

From the mountain Semetey sees Kül-čoro interacting with the maids and takes Kan-čoro and their horses down to join them. When Semetey attempts to cross the river, he barely makes it across because he is not riding Tay-buurul and only by calling on spirits for help he makes it. He is then greeted by the maids and Ay-čürök and learns that he and Ay-čürök had been betrothed by their fathers before birth. The story ends with Semetey and Ay-čürök consummating their union.

While the second poem in *SMB* and *STJ* tell the same fundamental story, the former contains almost no comedy. In *SMB* Kan-čoro and Kül-čoro fall asleep drunk on *arak*

when Semetey told them to keep watch. Atop the mountain, when Semetey sends Kül-čoro to go to the girls Semetey tells Kül-čoro how to ride Tay-buurul, but he responds that he knows Semetey's horses better than him because he used to take care of them. When Kül-čoro is talking to Ay-čürök Semetey believes them to be kissing and rides down to them as a result. None of these passages are real jokes, they just make Semetey look like a fool or bad leader, they are not really mocking him either. It just exemplifies that he not as good of a leader as Manas was.

In comparison, *STJ* is full of mockery, mostly about Semetey. At the beginning of the story when Ay-čürök steals his gyrfalcon, he fails to pick up a piece of cloth from horseback and his companions have to help him. Semetey wonders if someone richer than him, maybe a rival hero, lost the cloth. When Kül-čoro is sent to Ay-čürök's party to investigate, he is challenged by one of the girls and threatened with death if he approaches. Kül-čoro challenges her back, exposes the breast of another girl, and demands to know why Ay-čürök took Ak-šumkar. Ay-čürök threatens to have him killed and demands to know his lineage. Kül-čoro tells her and again threatens her, this time with raiding and kidnapping – the girls laugh at him in return. When Semetey decides to join them, he faces the river and is too prideful to rest and look for a chance to cross, so he plunges into the water. Because he gave his good horse Tay-buurul to Kül-čoro he nearly drowns crossing the river. Watching all of this, the girls make fun of him and laugh until they wet their pants. Ay-čürök and Semetey insult each other and she even dares him to fight her. After calming down they decide to go to Akun Khan's city to feast and rest, where Ay-čürök and Semetey go to bed together. She leaves in the night and when Semetey and Kül-čoro find her in her father's yurt, she tells him off for his bad manners and sends him back to his wife Čačikey.

In *STJ* Semetey is not only portrayed as a bad leader he is also mocked continually. This is strange because he is the protagonist of this story and those are generally not mocked to hell and back. This also does not really fit a narrative of learning from other's mistakes because

In *SMB* Semetey is more of a failed hero, in *STJ* this idea is taken over the top and he is just made fun of constantly

The constant comedy and failure makes Semetey look like a fool instead of a hero, you just cannot take him seriously.

In *SMB* he is not a great leader, but at least he is not the butt of every joke.

There is no real element of "this character is stupid and so you should learn something from his mistakes" – it's more like a mock-epic to quote Daniel Prior

Is this in some way related to the way *STJ* came to be, was Tımbek Japıy uulu just pissed off at the police chief and gave him a mocking version of *Semetey*?

Because this excerpt got published, at least Arabayev saw something in it that was worth sharing and maybe even potentially successful.