Contemporary Kazakh Literature

Prose Anthology
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(b. 21.03.1965)

Aigul Kemelbayeva is a writer, screenwriter and literary critic. She graduated from Kirov Kazakh State University (now Āl- Farabi Kazakh National University, 1987) before going on to study fiction writing at Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow (1989–94). She worked for newspapers before taking up the position of head of the Literary Department at Қалебек Қуанышбаев (Qalibek Quanyshbayev) Kazakh State Academic Theatre.

Kemelbayeva is the author of a variety of prose works, including a short story for children, ‘ closeButton(Žеtinši қу̇ рлыққа ѕа̄а̇хат’ (A Trip to the Seventh Continent, 1986), a collection of short stories, Tobylğysaj (2001), and a novel, Mûnara (The Tower, 2003), as well as essay collections: Ма̇ жнûн жûр̃е̇к (Majnun-Heart, 2013) and Sôz-Hikmet (Words of Wisdom, 2016). She has published more than two hundred literary articles and essays in major Kazakhstani papers, many of which reflect on Kazakh literature in a wider, world literature perspective. Her short stories have been collected in Nezavisimyy Kazakhstan: Antologiya Sovremennoy Literatury (Kazakhstan During the Years of Independence: An Anthology of Modern Literature) published in 2013 in Moscow and translated into Turkish, and in a German anthology of international prose, Glückliche Wirkungen: Eine Literarische Reise in Bessere Welten (Berlin, 2017). She adapted Maġžan Zhumabayev’s (Magzhan Zhumabayev) short story ‘Šolpanның қûнã̄сî’ (Šolpan’s Sin) into the film Kûna” (Sin, 2005; dir. by Bolat Šäripp).

She is the recipient of the Daryn State Youth Award for Literature (2000), as well as nineteen other literary awards, including the Baubek Bulkyşev Literary Prize of the Kazakhstan’s Union of Journalists (1998). She has been a member of the Kazakhstan Writers’ Union since 2001 and won the Soros Foundation – Kazakhstan award for a debut novel with Mûnara (2000).
Kôkenaj and Қalkaman

Dedicated to the bright memory of Anuarbek Isahanuly, the direct
descendant of Kôkenaj batyr
Қalkaman escaped his tribe on account of love…¹

The events narrated in the poem ‘Қalkaman-Mamyr’ (1912), by the great
poet and philosopher Šäkerim Kûdajberdiuly, took place exactly two
hundred years earlier by the River Syr.

Polaris, the guiding star of the north, was born on the sky.

In a dream, Қalkaman saw one of his very distant ancestors, from the
seventh preceding generation. The old man was walking a wet, straight path
through the mountains, towards the smoky horizon. A cloth sack covered his
horse’s head. A second rider followed, astride one horse and leading another.

Near the banks of the Syrdrâ, Қalkaman had been for a stroll with his
friend Itbağa. During troubled times, Itbağa had lost both his parents; in terms
of kinship and community, therefore, this sorrowful son was counted among the
dead. Itbağa was ready to die without any fear, believing in the old expression:
‘After death, there is no humiliation’. In one of the more brutal battles, Itbağa
had made way for Kôkenaj, giving that great hero his own horse and thereby
saving his life.

A messenger arrived with news of a terrible rumour: the forces of the
Dzungar Khanate, like melted ice on the ocean, were preparing to raid the
peaceful Arğyn and Najman tribes. Kazakhs had enjoyed a calm winter that
year; however, with mid-spring, when the cuckoos began singing in the woods,
the number of invaders had doubled. The messenger had also alerted the Üjsin
tribe of the Senior žûz² that the Kyrgyz inhabiting the wide, open mountains and
the Žetiôgiz River with their myriad horses were supplying the Dzungar chief
Tayiji with weapons and food; they also equipped their horses. The Kyrgyz were
sympathetic to the Dzungar and Kalmyk Khanates, and promised to join their
war against the Kazakhs.

¹ From ‘Қalkaman-Mamyr’ by Šäkerim Kûdajberdiuly. Translated by the National Bureau
of Translations.
² The žûz are ancient Kazakh tribal divisions. The Senior žûz inhabit the southern and
south-eastern parts of Kazakhstan; the Middle žûz are found in the central, eastern and
northern parts of the country; and the Junior žûz derive from the west and south-west.
By then, the clans inhabiting Žetisu and Ķaratau were exhausted from moving back and forth, fleeing each invasion. All young Kazakhs, including Ķalkaman and Itbaķa, had become accustomed to sleeping with their scabbards and combat knives. In better days, they would roam the steppe freely, visiting any Kazakh dwellings they came across.

Someone – a warrior? No, a dervish – was walking along the road, hurrying beside the Syrdariâ and scaring the bustards flocked there like ants. The young men lying on the green grass, their horses tied up, raised their heads at once.

‘Greetings to you, young men!’ the dervish addressed them. ‘May God save your souls! Damned, rotten life!’

He settled down on the grass on his back, put his sack on his head and fell asleep immediately, snoring. He dozed a bit, woke up quickly and then stared at the steppe stretching into the distance.

‘Our ancients bore witness that this place, the Ķarahân Hills, once was a virgin land ruled by Itbaķa beg!’ he said.

Itbaķa flinched, surprised to hear his name spoken by the stranger.

‘I do not own a house or a hearth’, continued the dervish. ‘The leaves are my blanket, the ground is my bed. I’m as meek as a lamb. Dervishes often move to and fro, from one place to another, existing like that. You are always under threat on the battlefield, my lad, annihilator of Kalmyks. Your enemies will curse you, demanding: “A humiliating death for the Kazakh!” By the way, you will live long.’

‘I wouldn’t say that everywhere I go, I see Ķorkyt’s grave’, replied Itbaķa.

‘Probably, death more resembles a lightning bolt that strikes you suddenly.’

‘I’m making my way to our forefather Ķorkyt’s grave, in fact’, said the dervish. ‘Nomads will move from the Syrdariâ soon. You, brave men, have your targets. I know you’re mighty combatants, but be cautious – you are not quick to obey the elders, and this will cause you many troubles. You will bear the hard life of a warrior, making the woods your home, abandoning your clan against your will.’

He turned his bronze face to Ķalkaman, and his eyes grew sharp. ‘My respectable young man’, he said to him, ‘you are the honourable son of a famous tribe. It is said that if a girl does not cast the first glance, a man will not see her at all. Your glory will be as bright as Ķorkyt’s light, illuminating the years to come. Be careful with your sentiments and emotions!’

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3 Beg – title for noblemen, more specifically, a lower military-administrative rank after khan.

4 Ķorkyt was an eighth-/ninth-century philosopher, poet and musician. According to legend, he sought immortality as his life drew to a close. In lonely torment, he hollowed out a precursor to the қобyz, a classical Kazakh stringed instrument associated with shamanic healing. Playing its music, he staved off death – until he fell asleep and was bitten by a venomous snake. Thus the saying: ‘Wherever you go, there is Ķorkyt’s grave’ (i.e. you can’t avoid death).
The dervish took out a flute and played a mournful melody, which sounded like a camel calf bewailing the loss of its mother. Then he started to ponder aloud: ‘When the mother Syr was named Қyzyl-Dariә and flowed across the gigantic Қaraқұм, its channels never dried, by the power of Almighty; it flowed as if it wept from being thirsty in the wild sands. Since our ancestors dwelled in the Қaranә Mountains, the Syr flowed to the Kerdeри Sea, which was renamed the Əgиз Sea; I suppose people have forgotten about those years. Қәрқyt was born during that peaceful time. A legend says that once upon a time, a slave from the Syr who was begging for his freedom had a prophetic dream: the Creator of the world, the Almighty, showed the rainbow to his beloved slave. Can you imagine this Absolute Power selecting stars with different colours of flowers, and joining them into a brilliant arc? Green, yellow, red and blue, shining… why was it hard to believe, then, that two great waters should stream into the sea? When the earth and sky merge, the soul of a man rises up. According to our ancestors’ premonition, the two waters which flowed into the Khazar Sea—the Syrdariә and the Əмudariә—changed direction and streamed towards the Kerdeри Sea, a sacred area, enabling the Ңәжә, a tribe rich with батыры,5 to shelter from invasions and wars. Now it is your turn, and you must stand in defence… If you do not mind, let’s have our dinner here.’

They hunted for bustards, dug a triangular hearth and started the fire. The flames illuminated the rays of the sunset. ‘Since ancient times’, continued the dervish, ‘when they escaped from their enemies, my people acquired the habit of returning to the Syrdariә, calling it “Great Mother”. The Бәтпәкдәла Desert defends its saiga antelopes, and its Kazakhs, too. A silent desert is a shelter for a person; this truth is familiar only to dervishes and tumbleweeds. When people move from their lands, they lose their consciousness. The folk who are alive greet each other. Where are your casks as wide as lakes, full of қымyz?6 Where is your түрлүк7 made of mink fur? Were they left in the Ertis or Esil or Нү thus rivers when we hastily abandoned our lands? A thief will die on the ride, as the saying goes. As the Dzungars’ invasions of our lands are wrong, their guts will be eaten by dogs. Before the stars in the sky fade away and the first rays of the day arrive, I pray to the Almighty. Do not forget that Türкistan was the centre of spirituality for our prophet predecessors. A human being is mortal. Remember that all your noblemen will be buried there. I witnessed a hundred wild geese in flight, hit by sudden lightning; and I saw how seventy of them fell immediately from the sky, dropping on the ground. I was bewildered by the force of a golden

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5 Батыр – originally term for ‘hero’ or ‘valiant warrior’, roughly equivalent to the European knight; nowadays the term signifies military or masculine prowess.

6 Қымyz – beverage of fermented mare’s milk highly esteemed for its refreshing qualities; it is the main drink for special occasions.

7 Түрлүк – a thick covering for the lower part of a yurt, typically made of felt.
arrow! Dzungars and Kalmyks will still attempt to destroy the Kazakhs. In forty years’ time, even peaceful people are likely to see such a disaster.’

The dervish kept silent during dinner. Relaxing afterward, he settled down on the ground. In the morning, there was no sign of him. The two young men remembered only his last words.

Among the peoples who bear the eye-shaped insignia, the Tobykty are particularly adept in moving on horseback and camelback; the Arghyn and Nozaj tribes had seen many invasions – generations of their people were brought up in cradles on horseback. The Dzungars and Kalmyks had defeated the Najmans and Kerejs and pushed them away from Altaj and Esil. When these tribes had been expelled from their lands, the legendary sage Ainet Baba was seven years old. Since then, seventy-seven years had passed; by that time, the Dzungars in the east had become powerful. For Kazakhs, it was a matter of survival: the age of peace, food abundance and plentiful horses had long disappeared. The Arghyn-Kypsha, Najman- Konyrat and Kerej-Uaks could not find any rest along the banks of the Esil and Nura rivers, in the fertile and rich steppes of Saryarka. These tribes migrated to the Uyin Senior and Junior zuz lands, escaping their enemies and moving nearer to Tulkipas, Kazygu rt, Zidelibaysyn, Kozybasy, Su, Zetsiu and Ush kian in search of territory.

Since the seasonal birds had flown over Tyrnauyz and crossed over Mount Kap, reaching the Syrdariâ, Bagazy’s daughter Mamyr had changed. In the lakes, rich in thickets of reeds, swans would not leave their cygnets until the first cold. Beautiful Mamyr, Bagazy’s single daughter – herself like a cygnet (for mamyr means ‘cygnet’, as well as the month of May) – had not been engaged to anyone yet. She was living with her parents, as was said, ‘on the right side’ – a reference to the traditional place in the yurt where daughters who had not yet been married resided. Although it was high time for her to get married, no one dared to send matchmakers to Bagazy, a wealthy and respectable man. They did not wish to embarrass him – he who had raised his daughter like a boy – by reminding him, implicitly, that he did not have an heir. The Kazakh tribes had settled and grazed horses in the steppes since the time of Alaasha Khan, their common ancestor. Beautiful Mamyr also grazed horses, and carried a bow with arrows. The neighbours pitied Bagazy for not having an heir – but nobody would say so out loud.

Mamyr gathered the horses, left the mares to the stallion and returned to her auyl.8 On her way home, she met two young men. She recognised A’jetk’s youngest son and Olzaj batyr’s brother, Kalkaman. Mamyr had been a rider

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8 Auyl – socio-economic formation considered to constitute the heartland of the nation and a basis for an ethnic and cultural union of the nomadic community. Consisting of 50–70 yurts in the eighteenth century, it developed into its current permanent state of ‘rural settlement’ (of a minimum of 100 dwellers) when Kazakhs adopted a settled mode of life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Auyl can also be used as a synonym for ‘native land’ and ‘homeland’, concepts revered by the Kazakhs.
since birth, and Ķalkaman had achieved the same level as she had – he boasted of his speedy horse and proposed a race. The noise from his horses’ hooves summoned the other two, and the three riders galloped along the steppe, racing like birds flying in the sky.

When the elders attended a dinner elsewhere, the young people of the auyl organised a traditional party for young people – a bastangy. Having exchanged her ‘male’ clothes for a woman’s garments, Mamyr appeared as slender and striking as a falcon. She wore a bird-beak ring on her finger, moon-shaped šolpy – ringing pendants – in her braids and chained silver earrings. Thus did everyone observe her wearing such an outfit for the first time, and no one could hide their surprise at registering her beauty. Mamyr had never made use of ornaments, but that night she also wore an embroidered taķiâ cap, to which her mother had affixed owl feathers from her own parents’ collection – they had once been famous in the district for collecting them. Ķalkaman and Mamyr had splendid matching headgear: hers the feathered taķiâ, his a bôrik, a round, fur-trimmed cap.

After midnight, while playing aksïjek,9 Ķalkaman exclaimed: ‘How lovely you are, like a tender duckling, girl in the feathered hat! Alas! You are my clan sister, darling Mamyr, Bajgazy’s Mamyr! Mamyr smiled proudly and replied: ‘I’m not the one for you, Ķalkaman; we are forbidden to each other…’ The young man’s heart was set aflame upon hearing this response. Mamyr noticed his look of passion, and a sudden idea struck her. (Its source was the epic poetry of love, and she cast Ķalkaman in the role of the prophet Yusuf, who was said to have fallen so in love with Zulaikha.) Consumed with desire, the girl said: ‘I would be grateful to the Creator if you were to become mine. We are not the first ones who shall break the law of the steppe, which does not allow us to be engaged to co-descendants until the seventh generation. I won’t turn away from you, even if they kill me tomorrow. What do you respond to this, my love?’

When Ķalkaman realised the world would be dark without Mamyr, he shivered from the horror of losing his love; however, he understood that he was committing a transgression. The two lovers met each other near the auyl at dusk. Although he was sure of his love for Mamyr, Ķalkaman confessed his doubts to her.

‘Duckling, Mamyržan, Bajgazy’s favourite’, he said, sitting astride his horse and looking straight into the girl’s eyes. ‘A stallion – the leader of the herd – will send away the fillies. The leader never touches them, because they all belong to a single herd. One drop of poison infects a whole cauldron of wine. Our ancestors were afraid of mixing the blood of kin. How can we hide the fact that we both belong to the same clan?’

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9 Aksïjek – lit. ‘white bone’, a game played by adolescents in the summer; participants throw a cow’s long shinbone into the woods and run searching for it. The objective is both to exercise attention and have a framework for socialising with the opposite sex.
‘Kaľkaman, those words do not mean anything to me. I have made my choice, my darling! I met you with the help of the Almighty. I fell in love with you; I see how noble you are. Though I was born a girl, I took the role of a son for my father. How long shall I reign as Bajgazy’s golden falcon? I am fifteen now, and you haven’t been engaged yet. We are not able to break the rules governing marriage. In the worst case, we shall wait and see!’

The clouds travelled along the dark sky, and thunder raged with bright flashes of blue lightning, frightening the earth. Hail came down with fury alongside the rain. Yet Mamyr felt nothing but passion for her lover, and would have felt this way even if the lightning had struck her.

At last, the gentle summer season found the Middle žůz tribes that settled around the Karatau Mountains extending to the Šu River. Cuckoos began their mating calls – the males were relentless. In the lakes overgrown with cattails and marshes were many nests of crows, grey herons, ibises and bitterns. Birds did not cease their noisemaking all night.

The lovers met again in the place called Bôriojnak. It was soft with thick cattails and bulrushes. Mamyr entrusted her horses to the stallion and arrived to see her man.

‘I understand you’, she said. ‘It’s true that no one ever heard of a man from the Tobyķty marrying a girl from his own clan.’ Her eyes shone brightly. ‘My fourth ancestor in the Tobyķty, great-grandfather Sary, had four sons: Māmbetej, Ūmbetej, Māmbetsopy and Kišik. From Māmbetej, my father, Bajgazy, was born. From Kišik, your father, Ǎjtēk, was born. If they are brothers, we are their grandchildren. Do not blame me for describing the family tree. I suffer much from the fact that both of us are co-descendants. Today a rider from the Najman steppes visited us to make a match and hung his silver-topped whip, unfolding it. My father did not return the whip. This means I’m engaged now. You cannot ask a girl’s hand who has been engaged. Do you agree, Kaľkaman?’

‘My darling, my swan, I’m ready to sacrifice myself for your sake!’ replied Kaľkaman in a halting voice. ‘Tell me you are mine; the rest is in vain. The Prophet also never knew his future.’

That day, old Anet Baba had a nightmare. An attendant flung open the doors of the white yurt, and, without kneeling, entered and announced: ‘Tāte, Tāte,’0 I have terrible news. Kôkenaj batyr has sent me to inform you that two wrongdoers of our tribe have sinned and brought shame on us by breaking the great law that has existed since Żānibek Khan’s time. Kôkenaj is outraged and furious. He seeks to kill these two lunatics. The brothers Olzhaj and Bajbōri are grief-stricken; they are asking if Kaľkaman should take the girl and escape from the auyl…’

‘Do not rush, my son; tell me these things without haste.’

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0 Tāte – depending on the region, a form of address to an older woman, or man, meaning ‘aunt’, ‘sister’, ‘uncle’, may also signify ‘mother’ or ‘father’.
‘Kalçaman and Mamyр have married secretly! Kôkenaj batyr is saying that Māmbetej and Ümbetej will punish the wrongdoers by themselves, and if the girl’s side consider their honour, they must do as he has ordered. I come to tell you this, tāte. If I am mis-speaking, please forgive me!’

In early years – when Tāuke Khan’s grandfather, Esim Khan, the Brave Giant, conquered Tûrsyn Khan in Taşkent – one of his daughters, Könyrbike, was given to Sary. Kišik and Māmbetsopy were born to her; Māmbetej and Ümbetej were born from Sary’s first wife.

A’net Baba, who was eighty years old at this time, sat on the tekemet, the ornate felt mat covering the floor of the yurt, with his eyes shut. He swayed from side to side, deeply affected by the news. Hard times had arrived. If Kalkaman and Mamyр had indeed left the auyl hand in hand, this would be a heavy blow for the tribe.

From Ajetek’s first wife, Olżaj was born; from his second wife, Bajbořī and Kalkaman. Kalkaman had now reached his sixteenth year. By that time, Kökenaj, who descended from Ümbetej, was about sixty years old and the leading batyr of the Arğyn tribe. He considered the Kalmyks his permanent enemies – he could raid them forty times during a night, like a wolf. He was not only famous in Tobykty, but also among wider Arğyn and the Middle žüz. Kökenaj had lived his entire life waging bloody battles, having his meals on horseback and sleeping with his spear next to him.

He was a powerful man who was used to selecting the best horses, and had a very stubborn, unforgiving character. Ajetek, leader of the Middle žüz, was visited by a young advisor of the Senior žüz, Tôle. Tôle bì hailed from Üjsin territory. He had studied religion in Taşkent, and had good knowledge of the secrets of the natural world, and of geography. The pale face of the wise old man, once radiant with wisdom, was now sunk in confusion. ‘Oh, dear’, he said, ‘the elders used to say that nobody hears how owls fly, and nobody blames young men for their sins. Kalkaman, my son, will bear many curses and suffer much! What should I do? Hares may pull dead lions by their beards.’

He wanted to speak with his nephew Kökenaj face to face and come to an understanding. Yet Kökenaj did not accept the old man’s proposal to give Māmbetej a dowry and double the fine for the wrongdoing.

‘I’ll ask the bies to adjudicate Kalkaman’s shameful behaviour at trial’, Kökenaj replied. ‘As for Bajgazy’s daughter, I’ll kill her myself – and no one can stop me, no mercy for her. I’m not going to forgive them, although they are of my own clan. To break the rules of the ancestors is a great sin; it is the beginning of a malady... The cause of any event, any disaster, any crime is a woman! It must be you who takes responsibility for stopping this nonsense... those two have brought shame on us! Our tribes have suffered many losses from the red-headed Kalmyk invasions; it is outrageous when we destroy ourselves.

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11 Tôle (1663–1756) was the head bi (judge) of the Kazakh Senior žüz, as well as an orator and poet.
by neglecting the codes of the steppe.’ He said all this as if making a vow, gripping his scabbard firmly in his hand.

‘Kôkenaj, be patient; the Qur’an and the *shari’ah* permit the marriage of two grandchildren. All human beings emerged from two pairs and a drop of blood. It is regretful that the race of Adam and Eve occasionally make errors. And mixing blood is not a crime for other nations of the Earth, only Kazakhs. However, Kazakhs… I agree completely with the point that our blood is pure because of men’s honour’, said A’net Baba, looking down.

‘Täte! You are encouraging those jealous kin around us to assume that the Tobykty are insane. They knew the fact that it is abnormal to marry until the seventh generation! I am not Kôkenaj if I allow anyone to break such a tradition, which has existed from Zänibek Khan’s time, or if I am not able to stop the acts of perverts!’

‘Do not blame the innocent – and don’t make vows! They are not horses to sacrifice… both of them are of your own blood…’

‘You are wrong, täte! Marrying his own clan sister is a big crime. This behaviour can’t be compared with a childish cousin’s tricks. If he wanted to marry, there are many girls about! Kalkaman has trampled on the traditions of the folk.’

A’net Baba realised that, for Kôkenaj, Kalkaman and Mamyr had become severed limbs. He was ready to murder them. A’net Baba decided to save the young couple, no matter their crime.

‘Although Tobykty is a small community, it isn’t degenerating’, Kôkenaj continued. ‘Täte, no one knows the *shari’ah* as well as you do. But the Qur’an teaches us not to marry our mothers, sisters or daughters. If anyone commits this shameful act, he is an unbeliever.’

Kôkenaj’s harsh censure forced old A’net Baba to weep with regret; the fierce words made his old bones ache. Kôkenaj batyr’s mother had been a Kalmyk, and people concluded that his strict character was his blood inheritance from her. The Kalmyk beg Ulaly beheaded the Middle žiz leader Kožabergen in 1647; Kožabergen’s wife, still pregnant, was enslaved by the raiders. His two brothers, Suyrbas’s sons Ali and Sary, were young. Thirteen years later, accompanied by Olžas batyr, Sary exacted vengeance for his brother’s death, defeating Ulaly in battle. Ulaly had had a Kazakh wife, and their beautiful daughter was given to Ümbetej. Kôkenaj was born from this marriage. His mother named him ‘Kuknai’ in Kalmyk, which meant ‘Green Poppy’. He became the commander of Täuke Khan’s force, and was famed as a courageous warrior, hard as an iron, who knew no mercy for Kalmyks or anyone else. He would go on to cross the thousand bridges of Hell, fighting for months and years on the borders of his land.

A month after his argument with A’net Baba, a terrible rumour spread among the humble Najman and Kerej tribes that Kôkenaj had murdered Mamyr, shooting her in the heart with an arrow. Thus Mamyr was killed by her brutal clan brother: she had not been able to utter her last word – ‘apa’.
‘mother’ before dying, like a swan, blinking her tender eyes. Not long after that, half of the twelve clans of the Arğyn (the Ķarakesek, the Ķanźygaly, the Başentiin, the Atýgaj, the Ķarauly and the Tobykyty) held a meeting, at which people shared their great grief and marked the event.

The renowned Ķanźygaly orator Išpek bi made a declaration, as loudly and clearly as a wild goose: ‘Bies and begs, listen to me! Oh, Ānet Baba, wise man, righteous man! Ķalkaman is too young, and has shamed Kôkenaj hatyr. We are noblemen; we have sprung from an honest nation; we were not born from slaves. Rumour, like a downwind, spreads far. Our people are gentle, like lambs. I cannot say that this great tragedy will not pass to the Ķypšaḵ, Najman, Ķoňyrat, Kerej and Noğaj, as well as the Üjsin, Alban and Dulaţ, Ķanly, Ysty, Šanyškyly, Ālim’s Kete-Šomekej, Žetiru’s Tabyn-Tama, Bajıly – all sons of Alşyn, even to those Adajs who dwell in the sands neighbouring the Turkmen, Karakalpak and Bashkir. This crime, and our shame, will be known to all.

‘We’ve maintained our honourable name and pride, and have been highly respected since the time of Öğyz. A daughter is but a guest in a house. Through marriage, our daughters belong to other tribes, is this not so? We witnessed the shame when a brother married his own clan sister. Our ancestors decreed that no man among us may marry a girl until the seventh generation, because a weak and nondescript thing may be born from them. Our predecessors preached this in order to maintain the purity of the race.

‘This great disaster is beyond enduring. I do not blame the kinship. We all descend from Ķanźygaly and Tobykyty, two related tribes. Wise Ānet Baba, you are the seed of great nomads, our spiritual guide. Please, give us your answer; do not mystify these people! The nation’s power is in its heroes; a hero’s power is in the nation. Do not become involved with undesirables. These troublemakers are to blame. What would we do if tiny Tobykyty separated into two because of them? We were born from Kazakhs who had abandoned places when they took offence. Our brother committed a crime – that is why the folk are waiting for the elder’s decision. It is intolerable to behave as slaves, and forget the ancestors’ blessings. This conflict is not the conflict over widows; it is to avoid future maladies! We grow because our blood is clean. If the clans mix their own blood, we are certain to beget monsters. Say your piece, even if the sinner is of your blood! A bad example is infectious. Say your piece, if you are a faithful bi. Think of your folk!’

‘Ḵalkaman, my dear boy, apple of my eye, how could I blame you?’ said the baba, his eyes full of tears. ‘I shall not kill this child myself!’

‘Better a glorious death than a shameful flight!’ said Išpek bi. ‘They say an eagle on the rocks pushes out one of its own eaglets. Kôkenaj killed his clan sister because the pride of his tribe was offended, and the kinship of Mâmbetej and Ŭmbetej agreed. Otherwise, they would not want to keep relationship ties. Do you want the family of Sary bi to become foes after this? Even if it were so difficult to decide the matter, releasing Ķalkaman without any punishment would be a blow to the clan. Sacrifice the ears, keep the head!’
Although Anet Baba was exhausted from the debates, he insisted on protecting the young man: ‘My people’s hearts are merciful, and their wills are heavenly strong. They never wish for anyone to die young. Be kind to your kinfolk. The Almighty favours forgiveness and kindness. The resentment of the innocent will cause us many troubles… Do you wish for me to kill this child, stoning him? Who hasn’t gone mad from falling in love with a woman? Did you forget that you were once ready to die for them? Are you willing to break my wings and pull off my tail? A man learns everything from Nature. Birds have thick feathers in winter and change in summer, acquiring light ones. Nature is in opposition to cruelty. When birds want babies, they begin to nest. The thick forests bloom with the help of birds; our land thrives with the help of the younger generation. If the young commit errors while young, this is not an enormity… May God the Great Redeemer forgive their sins! A sin is a gate that leads to sincere repentance.’

The crowd listening to the baba was against executing Kalçaman, and hoped he would fight out this debate. But the two sides could not come to any concord. In the end, Anet Baba declared that the punishment should be what is called ok bajlau. According to the ancient tradition, a person sentenced to death would ride through a gauntlet of archers, who would let their arrows fly as he galloped by. Survival meant innocence, and death meant guilt. While Kalçaman rode on a speedy horse, Kökenaj would be among those drawing their bows at him. Everyone knew well that Kökenaj was a highly skilled archer. In one battle with the Kalmyk Khoren, warriors witnessed him catch an arrow speeding toward him and return it in kind to his enemy. This time, if the arrow reached the victim, it would be considered just. Kalçaman would be blamed for his true, passionate love. ‘Oh, Creator, Almighty, you are the judge of what is white or black, you provide the answer’, concluded the old man in grief.

The slope of the Bóriojną Pass, suffused with the aromatic flavour of wormwood, was crowded with warriors who had arrived to watch the ok bajlau carried out. Several great warriors were selected to carry out the cruel ritual. Most of them were noted batyrs who had been raised on battlefields and ridden hundreds of miles on horseback in darkness, cold or heat, ready to drink their enemies’ blood.

When Kökenaj batyr, on his dappled white horse, joined the line of archers, a warrior from the group blocked his way. Kökenaj remembered this young man, who had saved his life by giving him his horse during one battle. He was a relative of Mamyr’s mother.

‘Kökenaj ağa,12 may I have a word?’ said the young man. ‘I am from the Najman tribe and wish to speak. A wolf cannot eat its pup! To witness two deaths of your own blood will be difficult for you. Your folk is against the young man’s death. My ancestor and hero Kišilik fought against Genghis Khan, and was a mighty warrior. I beg you, give your turn to me! I’ll aim to

12 Ağa – form of address to an older man, which can be translated as ‘brother’, ‘uncle’.
miss Қалқаман deliberately. Ӓға, do not let a future warrior be killed because of a girl! Қалқаман is not your ancient foe. He is not a duck in the woods, to kill him in such a way.’

Қалқаман did not beg for his life. Ҩнет Baba opened his hands to give his blessings. The old baba pleaded with the deities for mercy for this child; he played his kобyz and entered into a trance, attempting to dispel the excessive negative energy from the spirit world. Қалқаман reflected on his carefree days, when he was as unimpeded as the wind on the steppe, drinking the water of youth. He decided to wear his hauberk and meet his death on the field as a target. As he prepared, Ҩнет Baba encouraged him: ‘If you are a real man, then be one! If you are to die, you shall; if you are to live, you shall restore your honour.’

The territories of the Қосарал River, since the time of Ormanbet bi’s death and the deaths of many of the Ноғаж, had become an eternal, silent tomb. They could be seen from the horizon. Қалқаман rode through this land as nine arrows were loosed in a single instant, as wild as birds, before failing: the archers had not dared to kill the youth. Қөңәңәй became violent; his cruel eyes were fierce, and even his grey beard looked furious. He had called horseback ‘home’; now he drew back his bow and shot. The arrow nearly knocked Қалқаман off his horse, but he proved fortunate. He clung to the animal’s head and galloped away.

Қалқаман’s sister had disguised herself as a man, and watched the scene unfold from the crowd. She had had an upsetting dream in recent nights, and had prepared herself for the worst. Ҩқөңәңәй did not listen to the young warrior of the Najman, whose ancestor had battled the fearsome Genghis Khan. What does he have in his mind?’ whispered one of the witnesses to the other. ‘See, how bravely that young man claimed. If Қөңәңәй gave his turn to this warrior, I was sure this man would shoot a failed arrow. What a man!’

The Tobyкty side roared, Ӓқ жәл! Маәуәз!’ Then its riders galloped after the injured Қалқаман. The arrow had broken the silver side of the saddle and hit the young man’s leg, nearly breaking the bone. Yet he rode as fast as a wolf. His pursuers could not catch up: he was beyond reach. When he saw he was clear, he stopped and cut the tail off his horse, which signified that he was leaving his clan forever and halted his pursuers. His childhood friends from the Najman and Қанжығалы tribes did not stop chasing after him, however, and in the end they reached him.

Kazakh men usually took two horses with them – one for riding, and another tethered to the first, with which to alternate during a long trip. Knowing that, Қалқаман’s sister sent a horse bearing two sacks of provisions after her brother: some қәиәт – salty cheese; dried horsemeat; two flagons of water; and flint and firewood. Thus, the young man had two horses with him, the second tethered to the first, and he alternated them during the long journey. Ибәкә

13 Ӓқ жәл! – Godspeed! Маәуәз! – battle cry of the Tobyкty.
jumped astride his brown stallion and rode out to Ķalkaman, who was bent double and bandaging his broken leg tightly with the sleeves of his garment. Tears streamed from the eyes of his stallion.

‘Don’t do this… stop!’ said Itbaça abruptly. For it was he who had asked Kökenaj batyr for permission to aim at Ķalkaman and shoot to miss. ‘If you leave, the other tribes will think the Tobykty are cruel and wicked. Although you harbor a grudge against your people, do not forget that we descend from Alaš!’

‘Unfortunately, I’m dead to Tobykty’, replied Ķalkaman. ‘I cut my horse’s tail. It is a final sign of my departure, Itbaça. They shall count me among the dead. So please ask them to bury me – ask them to push my spear into the ground and put a black banner on it! I cannot say they are my clan. I am not desperate; however, my soul is burning! How can I forget what torture I endured? Tell them not to look for me after this!’

He fastened his silver belt to his hip and led one of his horses to the shimmering horizon, like the ancient Bashkir and Oğyz. Then he disappeared. As he rode from one slope to another, the road widened. The grass grew green and thick. Tulips bloomed. Summer arrived on the fragrances of numerous flowers.

Back in the auyl, one of Ķalkaman’s žènge, sisters-in-law, shed tears and recited some burial verses she had composed:

If a horse longs for its herd, it will twitch its head and ears.
If a warrior longs for his tribe, he will saddle his horse and ride!

Have you ever seen a land dearer than the Syrdariâ?
Do you know a tribe closer-knit than the Tobykty?

Ḳalkaman, you were a leader! Ḳalkaman, you won’t be back; you won’t forgive your kin. You won’t live with us any more. You’ll not see your land any more. We’ll not find our noble man, wherever we may search for him, whenever we try to spot his traces, even in the Milky Way!

I am a sorrowful one. I lost my kajny, my brother-in-law. I lost my wings!
He will be back during the rains of March; he will be back during April the beautiful!

He will arrive from distant lands. Then the steppe will flower. The dead can’t be resurrected, but the living will return!

Ḳalkaman headed from the west to the south-east, orienting himself by the Polar Star to the land where his mother, Ḳaldykız, had been born. Ḳaldykız was of the Ùjsin, and married into the Tobykty according to Kazakh tradition
the northern part of the Alatau Mountains.

Kalćaman passed countless gazelles grazing on the steppe. Then it rained a deluge; the sky thundered, and lightning crashed upon the earth. The young man was now sick, with a high temperature, and found himself losing consciousness. He could barely open his eyes, but when he did, someone in a white turban was turning to him. Is this a dream? Kalćaman wondered. He remembered his tethered horses and raised his head – and came face-to-face with the old dervish who had once approached him on the banks of the Syrdariâ. The man picked some sorrel with arrow-shaped leaves and applied them to Kalćaman’s wound. Kneeling, he untied his turban, which looked for all the world to Kalćaman like a burial shroud.

‘I swear by the name of the Prophet Muhammad, my white turban is indeed my burial shroud! May God bless you. As they say, among any forty people you meet, one might be Kydyr, who will bless you. A saint is God’s favourite servant. Baba Tükti Šașty A¿, my spiritual guide, gave me the vision. Here, this plant is for treatment of wounds, it will cure you. So… what are you doing alone on the steppe?’

‘A dead hero never chooses the ground upon which to die. I am dead; I hope my tomb will not be among my tribe!’

The old man said: ‘Are you from the Syr, or Sauran, like an ancient Kete? The wings of a falcon become stronger when it flies.’ He noted his tribal insignia. ‘Let us wish for good. Food for both the young man and the wolf is on its way, they say. If you cross over that slope, you’ll come to an auyl; a bonesetter will set your broken leg.’

Kalćaman still took long to recover his senses, and his feelings were as vague as fog. However, he was ready to see everything on his way, and to trust anyone he met. After sunset, the pair ate some salted, grilled meat and drank some kymyz from a leather dish.

‘In the north, in the dense forests, a yellow-headed, unfamiliar tribe dwells’, said the dervish. When the Pole Star appears in the sky and falls into the blue eyes of those inhabitants, there is night on that side; however, at this very time you’ll find your Senior žüz relatives.’ When Kalćaman recovered, he caught wild animals on the steppe and grilled their meat, preparing further provisions for the long journey. When he was thirsty, he had his torsyk filled with water. The Alatau Mountains had streams, and were full of wild goats and their kids, and wild argali sheep and deer, which frolicked on the rocks. There was no border between land and sky. The air was fresh and cool, fragrant with the scents of different grasses and flowers. The young man hadn’t experienced such delights of the senses before. How on the Earth could such a pleasant place exist, like Eve’s garden? The flavours and aromas of hundreds of fruits on the trees reached him, like stars in the expanse of night sky.

At last, he entered into a region of thick woods and gardens of apple trees, which covered the slopes like a newborn’s swaddling. Here, wild bears foraged
and birds picked fruit from the trees until the end of autumn. When the Pole Star reached the horizon, Қalkaman navigated the millions of stars in the Milky Way and finally came to his maternal uncle’s auyl.

Twelve years passed. The Tobyķty had sought Қalkaman, but a great famine interrupted their plans. The following summer, the Tobyķty resolved to try again, but new Dzungar raids saw many of them killed off. The survivors faced one of the most terrible events in Kazakh history, the Aktaban Šubyryndy – the ‘Years of Great Disaster’. The armies of Galdan Tseren, the eldest son of the Kalmuk Khan Tsewang Rabtan, invaded Kazakh lands like seven-headed dragons, and annihilated two-thirds of the inhabitants. They cut the bellies of pregnant women; they skewered toddlers on spears. In the days when all warriors used spears and swords, Kazakh warriors could face their foes with ease; however, the Dzungars were first to possess firearms, with which their numerous forces unleashed lead bullets as though they were raindrops. The Kazakhs became refugees, fleeing from steppe to steppe and eating dried fruit, grass – anything they found growing on the land. They escaped barefoot, covering themselves with deerskins instead of blankets and living in little shelters formed from spears. For these refugees, camel milk was food and drink alike; to avoid dying from thirst, they drank the sap of birch trees, later giving rise to the expression Қайың sauğan (‘milking the birch tree’). The events of this tragic time have been commemorated in the ballad Elim-aj (‘My People’), sung about the children deprived of their parents, who were as defenceless as orphaned fawns.

During the Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden, the Russian Empire prospected for gold in the east to offset war expenses. Before building military fortifications on the borders inhabited by nomads, Russia deployed spies to the deserted territories by order of Peter the Great. Russia captured the northern lands, and the Dzungar Khanate, the eastern parts. The densely populated khanate began to fight for more land, moving west into Kazakh territories. Hundreds of thousands of Dzungars raided Kazakh lands along the banks of the Ertis and Esil rivers, thus denying even the birds any chance of inhabiting these places. Secret caravans from the khanates of Kokand, Khiva and Bukhara transported armour to the Dzungars; the Russian Empire provided them with guns, and they obtained bullets from the Swedes. Enemies from all parts raided Kazakh territories. There was a real threat to the existence of the tribes descended from Alaš. ١٤ Galdan Tseren had strengthened his kingdom and military force after his father’s death; the seven rivers nourishing the fertile valley of the Blue Sea attracted the Dzungar tribes, and they added to their conquests. Alaköl, Bejne Sea, Қeң Uaŋ and Sasykköl were invaded by the Kalmyks. The Black Ertis flowed with blood and bodies.

١٤ ‘Alaš’ – another name for the Kazakh people.
‘Warriors! Unbelievers have captured your lands!’ called an old žyrau15 to his people in the war against the Dzungars. ‘The motherland is dearer than gold; when the people stand, they can reach the sky!’ The Kazakh armies lifted their clubs, spears and hammers against the invaders, and fired arrows into them. The Dzungar forces, countless though they were, never tended to their wounded or buried their dead: according to their beliefs, the law of the battlefield held that all casualties must be left behind.

In 1723, along the Syrdariâ and its two longest branches, the Aṅtal and Karatal, Kökenaj confronted the Dzungars with five thousand warriors, attacking them for a month until Kazakh clans moved west to the Karatau Mountains and the Žajyk River, nearer to the Russian Empire. During this battle, Kökenaj lost his six sons and Aṅet Baba lost five.

The Dzungars’ tactics, in response, consisted not of stealing livestock but killing more Kazakhs. Women hid their sons under cauldrons in their hearths, where they had gathered the corpses; in so doing, they saved the next generation. The vengeful Dzungars ordered the extermination of the families of Kökenaj and Aṅet Baba. They intended to take Kökenaj’s grandchildren and play with their bodies as if in a game of kôkpar.16 One of Aṅet Baba’s sons, Šaṅbabaj, survived, as did his wife, who gave a birth to a son – the last grandson, whom they called Bâkaj. Kökenaj’s six-year-old son, Žämeņke, also survived, and his grandson Tuâk would later continue the line.

When the Great Disaster struck, many Kazakhs vowed to die rather than leave their land, and Aṅet Baba, then ninety-seven years old, was among them. He wept like a baby in the cradle after his clan abandoned the territories. Long-necked cranes migrated in the sky above his head that summer.17 During a brief interval between wars, Kökenaj took the baba’s bones from Koškar Ata to the city of Türkistan, to inter in the mausoleum of the great Koža Ahmet Assau.

The Kazakh refugees from the great war moved near the city of Sauran, on the right side of the Syrdariâ. Many were taken into slavery. In the two hundred years since this calamity, the members of several Kazakh generations joined Dzungar tribes; in turn, some Kalmyk and Dzungar widows, with their children, joined Kazakh families. Many captive women and girls became mothers to both tribes, and did not stop shaking their cradles. Kazakhs and Kalmyks struggled until the collapse of the Dzungar Khanate in 1758. The heaps of bones littering the steppes became tombs. Then the time of Abylaj Khan arrived, and Kazakh power was resurgent.

In the land of Ùjsin, and in the clan of Aṅsiyķ Ėlibaj, Kaľkaman’s uncle Šapyraštî Ajkym welcomed him warmly and adopted his nephew into the clan.

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15 Žyrau – poet, performing his topical verses to music, but also an epic storyteller, military commander and counsellor to the rulers.

16 Kôkpar – sport in which a headless goat carcass is advanced by players on horseback towards the opposing team’s goal.

17 This expression signifies the death of a person.
The uncle married Қaлқaман to three wives: the first was his widowed sister-in-law; the second, a widow captured in a battle; and the last, a young girl. The clan elders insisted that they themselves pay the price for Қaлқaман’s marriage to the girl, out of respect for his courage in battle.

From then onward, Қaлқaман’s descendants adopted the five-pointed insignia of the Șaپyɾașty Ajkym sub-clan. When asked, ‘What’s your bone?’, referring to their lineage, they would answer: ‘ Қaлқaман Tobyкty’. The expression also arose, among people, ‘…as in Қaлқaман and Mąмyry’s conflict’. Nor did the Қaնyɾyɡaлы, Tobyкty and Kúrleуt forget Қaлқaман. Although the Kúrleуt belonged to the Қyрpaș tribe, Tobyкty’s father Kenğesopy adopted him. During a festive occasion, in fact, when the Senior ȥizz Қaʃkaraу’s horse took first place in a race, the Tobyкty side enquired about Қaлқaман.

The Tobyкty had moved from the Sүrdəɾiа. From Аңтек’s first wife, Ǫлțаʒ was born. Ǫлțаʒ had three sons, Ajdoș, Kajdos and Ẓaŋdos. Ajdoș’s own four sons survived the wars. A Tobyкty clan numbering forty people crossed the Oral Mountains and reached Or, Eleк and Oʒy. Further on, they stopped at the Mуɡaɭʒaɾ Hills. They searched for better lands in the deltas of the Yɾğıyz and Toɾγaɾ rivers. Ajdoș’s four sons (Yɾğızbaj, Kenğirbaj, Torγaɾ and Topaj) were born from his young wife during the seasonal migrations. In the waters of Kոtiɱtıл, Kοṭиbаɭ was born. During eventful periods of famine or war, Kazakhs would name their children Boкty (‘Shitty’), Bити (‘Lousy’), Ӳrтtty (‘Wormy’) or Ӳlʃyɭ (‘Tiny’), in order to save them from misfortune and the Evil Eye.

When Kόңенаɭ died from an arrow in 1728, his thirteen-year-old son Mąмaɭ wept over him, his arms around his neck. He became Mąмaɭ бaтаɭ, the khan of the Junior ȥizz during the reign of Нyɾalı Khan, and participated in the wars to defend Edıl and Ӳaʃyɭ, the Altaj and Тaɾbaɭaɭаtaj Mountains and the Bejне Sea from the invaders. Fifty years later, he led his clan to eight rivers in the mountains: his own ancestors’ land. Kиндиткaу was inhabited by Aɾɡyң- Nəjmаns, who had moved earlier. Kenğirbaj бi, Олțaʒ’s son, strengthened the minor five-bолy сы Tobyкty.

_Translated by Mitchell Albert_

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18 _Bолyсы_ – administrative term adopted in the nineteenth century; it consisted of 10–15 ауyлыs, each made up of 50–70 families.