

KAZAKH FOLK TALES

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ABSTRACT

These short Kazakh folk tales or fables are popular in modern Kazakhstan – they get published in colourful editions for children. What the publishers probably did not foresee is that they would also attract someone like me – a Linguistics PhD student from London on fieldwork in Kazakhstan. I became interested in these fables for a number of reasons: firstly, they attracted me as good language-learning aids; secondly, they provide some insights into the culture and the mentality of the Kazakh people; and lastly, they also turned out to be useful sources of data for my PhD on the Information Structure of the Kazakh language. I want to share these tales with the readers of the Journal of Postgraduate Research for the second reason. I would like to invite the readers to take a glimpse into the stories that have been told to the children of Kazakhstan for quite some time now. You shall see that each fable ends with a “moral” – the main statement and lesson to be taken away from the story. They teach one not to be greedy or lazy, not to complain about misfortune while enjoying good health, not to look for “easy” money which was not obtain through hard work, and to create one’s own luck through honest work and committed effort. These life lessons are as relevant (if not more!) in modern times as they were many years ago when they were first created. I hope you enjoy them.

¹ The author is grateful to the Wolfson Foundation for their generous funding of her PhD studies through the Wolfson Postgraduate Scholarship, which made the fieldwork in Kazakhstan possible.

INTRODUCTION

Short folk tales or fables are popular in modern Kazakhstan – they are often published in colourful editions for children. What the publishers probably did not foresee is that they would also attract someone like me – a Linguistics PhD student from London on fieldwork in Kazakhstan. I became interested in these fables for a number of reasons: firstly, they attracted my attention as good language-learning aids; secondly, they turned out to be useful sources of data for my PhD on the information structure of the Kazakh language; and lastly, they provided some insight into the culture and mentality of the Kazakh people. I want to share these tales with the Journal of Postgraduate Research for this final reason. I would like to invite you, the reader, to take a glimpse into the stories long recounted to the children of Kazakhstan. You shall see that each fable ends with a ‘moral’ – the main statement and lesson to be taken away from the story. They instruct not to be greedy or lazy, not to complain about misfortune while enjoying good health, not to look for ‘easy’ money which has not been obtained through hard work, and to create one’s own luck through honest work and committed effort. These life lessons are as relevant (if not more so) in modern times as they were many years ago when they were first created. I hope you enjoy them.

HE WHO COUNTS GOLD, DIES OF HUNGER²

When this happened nobody knows, but there once lived a scrawny pauper named Saġat. One day, he was staggering about aimlessly and could not see straight from hunger. Completely exhausted, he decided to lie down on the sand for a little rest.

Poverty must have followed him even into his sleep, and he dreamt that, as he was running to hide from his suffering, a pale old man with a beard down to his waist stood in his path.

“Wake up! If you take 10 steps to the right from this very place in the sand on which you are lying, you’ll see an old shelter in the ground. There is a ruined fireplace in that shelter, and if you dig under it just a little, you’ll find a leather purse that once belonged to Sulejmen, the trader. Every time you open and close that purse, a golden coin will appear inside. Then you’ll have enough for the rest of your life. Remember, a contented mind makes for a never-ending feast,” – the old man said and disappeared.

With a racing heart, Saġat got up, took 10 big steps to the right of his resting place, and came across the derelict shelter in the ground. As he was digging with his bare hands in the middle of the hearth of a ruined fireplace, he fantasised: “If I find one golden coin, I’ll eat till I’m full. If I find two coins, I’ll feed my family, and if I get hold of three coins I’ll buy a dress for my wife.”

Just as the old man predicted, he found the purse in said place. Open once – get one coin, open twice – two coins... Having opened the purse a hundred times, Saġat sat with his eyes fixed on the pile of coins and dreamt of building a palace with domes as high as those on the king’s palace. He forgot all about his hunger, his children, and his wife. With only riches on

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his mind, he opened the purse a thousand, a hundred thousand, a million times, as two weeks went by without him noticing. They say the wretched scrooge's heart stopped, and he bade farewell to this world.

THE MOST PRECIOUS TREASURE³

A long long time ago, when the sheep's wool was grey, the pheasant's feathers were red and its tail long, there were a lot of good-for-nothing youngsters just like the lazy lads of the present day. These lazy ones have a habit for much idle worrying and complaining, don't they? This is how one of them complained:

"Oh God Almighty, since it was You who brought me into this world, why did you not make me a wealthy person? At the age when I should be living a happy life of luxury, I cannot afford to buy food when I'm hungry or clothes when I need them!"

A wise old man overheard this and said: "Hello, my dear, why are you getting so upset? You do have riches right here with you!" The lad thought the old man was mocking him with his words and replied angrily: "Which riches are you talking about?!" The wise man remained calm and asked the young man: "My darling boy, would you please sell me these very two eyes you have? I'll give you plenty of gold and silver!"

The lad replied: "After I lose both eyes, what do I need gold and silver for? Keep those riches to yourself!" Then the old man went through the lad's 12 body parts one by one, asking him to sell each of them, which made the lad very angry. "Even if you offered a piece of gold the size of a horse's head, I wouldn't sell any of my body parts! I have no wish to become a cripple!" – the lad said bluntly. The wise man then said: "Aha, in this case then, a man's most precious treasure is his healthy body. A man like you, who has all four limbs intact, is a rich man. No gold or silver can replace this!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadežda Christopher is a PhD student in Linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies working on the Information Structure and Syntax of the Kazakh language. Nadežda has studied at SOAS since 2010 when she first started her BA degree in Linguistics, followed by a Master's in Language Documentation and Description.

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