ABDULLA KODIRIY
AT THE ULOK[1]

Yesterday I got my father's permission to go to the ulok. That's why my brother didn't object to me going there. I ate a hasty snack and ran into the barn.

– You're hurrying like you have six legs and seven hands!—laughed my parents.

I took my horse comb and began to groom my qashqa – black star[2]. The poor colt stirred, shook its head, nuzzled and wiggled. Then I thought about how next year this colt would be a powerful horse and I would be able to participate in next year's ulok and everyone would call me a "Turgun horseman"! I sank into sweet dreams.

During the Big Eid (Eid-ul-Fitr—an annual Muslim festival marking the end of Ramadan, involving the exchange of gifts and a festive meal **(translator's note)**) my relatives gave me lots of hayitlik[3]. I got so much hayitlik money I was able to buy a Mongolian saddle. I saddled up my colt. He looked really special. After cleaning it I bridled the colt with the Russian bridle my uncle had bought for me after many requests. I led the colt outside and took a good look at him.

The crupper was perfect. The saddle was firm. The girth was tight. And the bridle was as proper as official's. But he did not have a curb-bit. That put me in a bad mood. For some time I thought of what I should do about this problem. Suddenly I remembered a band of leather which my brother was keeping to make a bridle. I went down to the dugout to get it. I made a curb-bit.

When I put it on my colt he looked fantastic! He was as wonderful and official as any clerk's horse. I wept into his mane and tied him to a post. Now I only had to wear my tussore jacket, Russian trousers, patent-leather galoshes and a velvet skullcap. Then I would really be an official man!

My mother has a strange habit. Whenever I put on my best clothes she always starts to criticize me.

– Don’t wear them today! They’ll get dirty! You should wear them to a wedding!

If I did not give an “evil cry”[4], I would not be able to wear them that day. So I did. Then I put on my new clothes and girded my waist with a silken sash. I entered the room without my mother noticing and took my father’s silver handled whip. I snuck it out by hiding it in my robe.
A servant was bringing in meat. I took the meat and commanded to him to take the colt out to the courtyard. I brought the meat to my mother.

–Take care of your clothes and don’t wander in the dirt. Stay to the side when you watch the ulok. Be careful! Don’t rush your horse. — My mother repeated her worries over and over.

I took the colt from the servant and mounted. I raised the hem of my robe and put it in place so as to sit comfortably. I whipped the colt and it loped forward.

– Bravo! Well done! You’re a real horseman! — The servant cried out.

Hearing his praise I whipped the colt again. He flew like an arrow from a bow.

I took care of my colt by giving him water from an aryk waterway. Here I came across a group of horsemen. Some of them were friends of my brother. They greeted me and one of them asked about my brother. I said that he’d gone to the ulok.
– Our Mahkamboy[5] takes a great interest in ulok! — He said.
– Where are you going, young master? — asked another one.

– To the ulok! — I answered shamefully.

– You’ve made it! What a brave horseman! Keep it up, Turgun[6] horseman! — they said.
Their praise calling me a horseman felt good. “Thanks to your father!” I whispered.

I followed them. My colt seemed smarter than the other horses. He even tried to walk in front.

– Your horse is quite an ambler, young master! — They made stinging remarks.

I was embarrassed and could not speak. Then they talked about my brother again.

– I‘ve seen a lot of ulokchi[7] but I’ve never seen as big an ulok fan as Mahkam!— said one of them.
– His ancestors were winning ulok players.—said the son of Sobir[8] the miller.
– And look at his little brother who is only twelve years old. He’s trying to run the ulok at the age of twelve! —a boy said, making a gesture to me.

After such nice words I had goose pimples on my body. I could barely keep myself from laughing.

– When my father tells stories about his grandfather’s gallop everyone is amazed. He was able to take the ulok from among one or two hundred horsemen. — said a fellow with a thick moustache.

– He was the real ulok master of his times!—said the son of Sobir the miller.

If you have a good horse and power in your hands you will also have a chance to be an ulok master!—said another fellow.

After hearing this praise of my grandfather I was beginning to give myself airs. Suddenly we heard the sound of a horse running. We saw a fellow. He was in a summer robe. There was a white spotted goat slung over his saddle. He stopped and greeted with us, sitting on his horse.

–Can you help us this week, Caravanner? — asked brother Togon, smiling.

– Sure! I’ll help you! It’s not good not to help to good friends like you! But hurry! - he said impatiently.

We all went on together. But soon he lashed his horse and flew off like a bird. Apparently he could not endure our horses’ strides. We only just heard a few of his words that he had to go fast. Then the fellows began to talk about his horse.

– Valad’s[9] horse is really fast. If you’re an ulokchi you should have a horse like that! Otherwise it’s no use. — said brother Togon.

– It flies like the wind!—said the thick mustached guy.

We met my brother at the “Dombirovot” guzar[10] where there are shops and a tearoom. My brother and his friends paid the tea man for their pilaf. Then we all went on.

The fields around there drink water only in winter. There’s about a metre of friable soil. There were 20-30 ulokchies on the way to the games. Some of them were galloping; others were going at a jog trot.

The street was covered with dust. We couldn’t even recognize each other. I was afraid of my mother, who would damn me for my dusty clothes.

After a long walk we reached the ulok place. It was a field so huge it was impossible to see its boundaries. Countless numbers of people were gathered there - horsemen, spectators and fans.

Two samovars were boiling under an elm tree. There were 3-4 sacks of cucumbers close to the samovar. A group of men were selling them and praising their features.

My brother and his friends got off their horses and sat under an elm tree. It was too hot to stay out in the sun. That’s why I also found a place in the elm’s shadow. The people around me looked at me and at my colt. Feeling embarrassed I combed my colt’s mane. The ulok field was in an uproar. People were waiting impatiently for the ulok to begin.

– Today’s ulok won’t reach any great heights. I think it will be dull.—said one man.

– You’re wrong! They said Salim and Murod[11] the horsemen are here.—said other man.

– Yes! Yes! If Salim the horseman is here today the ulok will be great.—said another one.

– Salim’s horse is a Kazakhi horse[12]. It cannot bear the whip. It’s enough to just give it a voice command - said someone.

– There are three really great players. The third one is very skillful. It’s impossible to take the ulok from his hand!

– You’re right! I don’t see that horseman either. He was thickset.

– Bravo! He’s an agile guy. I asked a lot about him but couldn’t find out anything.

This topic was discussed for a long time. Some of them said that this horseman was alive, some said he was dead.

– He’s alive!—said one man.

– No! He fell under a horse and died at the hospital.—said another man.

– Don’t say bad things about people.—said a righteous man.

– Why should we debate about him?

– Anyway, we’re loafers.—said a man and smiled.

Again people began to argue the point.

– The ulok is here!—shouted someone.

This news made everyone fall silent. And keeping silent everyone looked at the ulok goat.

– The ulok is very young. For a good horseman it’ll be nothing to take it.

– This is good. A young ulok makes the game interesting.—another one tried to awaken a debate.

But then two horsemen running as fast as the wind galloped into the ulok field and people shut up.

– Salim the horseman is here!

– Murod the horseman is also here!

There were only whispers.

– Which one is Salim? The black one or the spotted one?

– It looks like Salim’s hand is stronger!

One of the horsemen was on a blue-black horse and another was on a piebald. Both of them were dashing fellows. When they came onto the field people rushed around.

– There now! We'll see a great ulok today!—people said.

– Today's ulok will reach the heights!—said people swinging their heads.

– Look at Murod's horse. It's energetic like it has wings.

– Are you talking about the blue bay?

– Both of the horses are powerful.

– The horse with his ears pricked up is the best!

– The ears are nothing! It's the breed that's important.

– No, no! If horse pricks up his ears it also neighs a lot. This is sign of the horse's power!

– They said that black horse is the best! The black horse is the best!

—My father, may God bless him, told me that if you want to purchase a horse look at his hooves. The hooves are very important.

They debated. Everyone debated with whoever was around him. I thought about their features of the best horse and began to search for such good features on my colt. When I saw them I was glad. When I did not I felt sad. Nurxon[13], Haydar[14] the stammerer, and Shokir[15] the snotty, my society friends, came up riding their horses. We put our horses in the same place. We talked nonsense. Shokir the snotty laughed while telling us his excuse for taking his father's horse. Haydar the stammerer mocked Shokir the snotty by telling us how his horse neighed at Shokir the snotty's mare. We laughed.

– From now on I will not ride a mare. I'm ashamed.—said Shokir the snotty.

His face was red. They were astonished at my colt's curb-bit. They asked me how much it cost.

– It cost fifteen tanga[16].—I said and hit the saddle with my silver whip handle, hoping my friends would notice it.
– Is this silver? — They asked and took the silver handle.

I nodded my head. I felt something very sweet. I looked at their horses and at mine. I glanced at their clothes and at mine. I saw myself as better than they were.

– Let's go ride our horses!—said Haydar the stammerer.

Despite Nurkhon's objections they took him with them. Shokir also followed. It was impossible not to follow them. As soon as I whipped my colt it ran so quickly that after ten steps they were behind me. After awhile I looked back and saw them looking at me. I made my colt run fast. I halted when I reached the border of the uplands. After a long time they reached the border too. Then we talked about the speed of our horses. Nurkhon said that his horse could not run because his brother had given it water when it was hot.

– When I was going to the bazaar for flour, suddenly the son of Eson[17] koknor[18] threw a ball of clay. From then on he won't run fast even when I whip him. He only shies away laying back his ears! But your horse is very good. It's the best colt! You're lucky to have such a strong horse. Don't let your servant to feed it, do it by yourself. Otherwise you'll lose this horse! That's my advice to you. — Haydar the stammerer said to me.
After a long time talking there we continued our horse race. Again I was out in front. When I neared the crowds of people I whipped my colt again and again. I wanted to get their attention. My colt was running like the wind. People looked at me and my vivacious horse. I began to comb my foal's mane with my silver handle. "You will notice me now!" I thought.

Then a noise rose among the spectators.

– Look! They are gathering the ulok tax.

– Well then it'll begin soon.

– Murod[19] the horseman stood up!

– Salim put on his kalpak!

– Rozi[20] the butcher is going to slaughter the ulok! He’s sharpening his knife.

– The rich men have stood up!

– Salim is going to take off his robe!

– Bravo, bold fellows!

We also were waiting for the ulok goat impatiently. Some of horsemen were changing their clothes; others were making their horses ready for the ulok. Some of the horsemen were paying the ulok tax. My brother gave me his silky robe and turban to hold and rode off into the field.

Almost all the ulokchi were on the field but the ulok goat had not been brought in yet.

– We could have slaughtered a camel by this time! I think the ulok was frozen!—said a man impatiently.

After a long time Orif[21] the sarkor[22] came into the field with the ulok slung over the front of his saddle. The most popular horsemen followed wearing their kalpaks and sitting slanted in their saddles.

– Ouch! Poor animal, where were you?—said the impatient people.

– Was the blood of the ulok washed off well?—asked someone.

– Don't mind that!—answered Orif the sakor.

He threw the ulok on the ground.

– Friends! I ask for you and your children to get to one side! It’s dangerous to stay near the horses.—said the sarkor.

The sarkor took the people’s blessings and rode his horse into the group of horsemen.

– Today we’ll see your power!—people shouted out to the horsemen they knew.

The ulok began.

One horseman grabs the ulok, then another pulls it away from him. Other horsemen come and try to take the ulok and hold it with their knee. The horsemen who are far from the ulok charge in and pull at the ulok. It's really great. Each of them tries to grab it on their bend. But there are more than ten hands grabbing different parts of the ulok at the same time. It's really hard to get it away from all these horsemen. But suddenly one of them gets the ulok and breaks free. But the others rush into him quickly. They catch him after ten or fifteen steps and start pulling at the ulok again.

The crowd roars. You can hear different voices, words and shouts.

– Put it on your bend!—shouted the spectators.

– Give the horse its head! Whip him!

– Don't let him take it!

– Give the horse more rein! Ride the horse and put the reins in your mouth! Don't rave!

– Don't give up the ulok! Ride your horse to the left!

– Hold it tightly!

– Oh! Why did you give up the ulok! What a lousy horseman you are!

– Is that a horse or a donkey?

If the ulok falls down one of the spectators takes it and tries to give it to his brother or to any familiar horseman. But the other horsemen do not care about him. They'll ride their horses right into him. But the spectator doesn't want to give up the ulok. After little while he takes to the sidelines, limping or favoring his hand.

A father cannot even recognize his son when he sees him. The ulok field is clouded with dust. Everyone sweats and aims to take and put the ulok on his bend. They don't pay any attention to their broken hands or hurting eyes. Their only concern is getting the ulok. It's very enchanting!

But it’s very difficult and it‘s not for everyone. Only those famous horsemen can do it. Even fear of death cannot stop them. As soon as one of them takes the ulok the others begin to run after him, again they pull at the ulok.

An hour passed. Suddenly the ulokchi men stopped pulling at the ulok. They gathered in one place. All of us on horse and on foot rushed over there to see what was going on. It was really hard to get into the crowd. I distractedly looked at people’s mouths. But almost noone knew what was going on with the horsemen. People’s faces were astonished.

–What happened?—they asked each other.

– Don’t move! Be careful!—someone said after few minutes.

People’s astonishment increased.

– Get to the side! Make way for us!

People got to the side.

– What’s happened?

– Nothing! Esonboy[23] fell under a horse.

– Is it serious?

– No! A little bit!

– What a thing to happen!—people said, looking at each other.

Four or five men brought out the injured person. They laid him under the elm tree. A man was sent for a telega. Another man poured water on Esonboy’s face. He did not move.

– Poor man! He was under five horses!

– If they didn’t hurt his critical organs he’ll recover. But I think he’s in bad shape.

– If his fortune does not allow it he will live.

“Poor man! He gave me fifty kopecks as a hayitlik. May God bless him! Let him get better!” I thought.

A telega was brought. Brother Esonboy was laid on the telega. My brother and his friends followed the telega to accompany it.

– Press salty cotton or red-hot bran on it.—people said.

Then the game went on. I watched the ulok till the end. It ended well. It ended well, no one else fell under a horse.

* * *

By the end I was tired hard of horse riding. As soon as I got home I went to bed and slept.

–Wake up! Wake before your father comes home! Otherwise he'll be upset.—said my mother, taking off the quilt.

– Did he go to the bazaar?—I asked in my drowsy state.

– He went to the Esonboy's burial!—answered my mother.

I wasn't sleepy anymore.

Translated by Shuhrat Sattorov

P.S: (This story was written in 1915 year. This is memory of my childhood. That is why I did not make additional changes (A.Q.).

[1] Ulok- is an Uzbek national sport. In some regions it's called kopkari. This is a team game in which the two mounted teams attempt to deliver a headless and legless goat's or ram's carcass weighing 30 - 40kg over the opposition's goal line. When the judge gives the mark, the line of horsemen takes off. One of them outrides the others and at full speed picks up the carcass of the goat from the ground. That fraction of a second is enough for the other riders to catch up with him and try to take away his trophy. This game is called ulak (in Uzbek it means "goat" or "kid") or kopkari (in

Uzbek it means "the game of many people"). In Russian the game is also called "flaying the goat".

[2] Qashqa- is a nick-name for a horse which has a black spot.

[3] Hayitlik—At the Eid people give money or sweets or gifts to children. It is called “hayitlik,” meaning something to put someone in good spirits.

[4] Evil cry- false crying

[5] Mahkamboy – is a man’s name.

[6] Turgun– is a man’s name.

[7] Ulokchi- is a man who participates in ulok.

[8] Sobir– is a man’s name.

[9] Valad– is a man’s name.

[10] Guzar- a crossroads where is a tearoom and a small bazaar.

[11]Salim and Murod– are men’s names.

[12] Kazakhi horse-a special breed of horse

[13] Nurxon– is a man’s name.

[14] Haydar – is a man’s name.

[15] Shokir – is a man’s name.

[16] Tanga – a currency which was used in the past.

[17] Eson – is a man’s name.

[18] Koknor – is a nickname for someone who uses drugs. Koknor is a drug which made from poppies.

[19] Murod – is a man’s name.

[20] Rozi– is a man’s name.

[21] Orif – is a man’s name.

[22] Sarkor – is a nickname. Sarkor means a man who is the head or ruler of the works.

[23] Esonboy – is a man’s name.