The Irony of the Mankurt Motive in Chingiz Aitmatov’ s The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (1980)

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The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (Russian original: I dol’ she veka dlitsia den’) was first published in the Moscow periodical Novy Mir in 1980. This was a time when the cultural climate in the Soviet Union was moving from thaw to glasnost (i.e. ‘openness’). Many of the discussions on the novel have been discussions concerning the revision of Soviet history that developed after Stalin’s death. But The Day has also been subject to discussions on religious aspects and aspects of Turkic nationalism. The main studies on religious aspects in The Day are by Hyun Taek Kim (1996), Ali İhsan Kolcu (1997) and Sang-Guk Suh (1996). The main study on nationalist aspects is by Ali İhsan Kolcu (1997).

In the Soviet Union the novel made mankur  a word around which critical discussions on history and collective memory were developed (Mozur 1995, 122-123). In the novel mankur  is a term that originates from an old Central-Asian legend, where the term is given to a slave taken among the colonized and tortured so severely that he forgets his past. A central question when interpreting the novel is how this term connects to the characters in the novel’s main story, and this is a question I will return to.

This study places itself within one of these well-established discussions, namely that on history revision. But rather than looking at how the history in the novel deviates from or conflates with official Soviet history, this study investigates the novel’s portrayal of individuals at the Kazakh steppe and how they interact with both Soviet history and local history. At the center of this study is the main character Yedigei’s involvement in his close friend Kazangap’s funeral and how he ironically turns to the distant past in order to arrange a proper funeral for his friend, who have lived most of his life at a train station on the Kazakh steppe.

The main scene and the stories that connect to it

The Day is a narrative of many stories that are bound together by one scene, namely a train station Boranly-Burannyi at the Kazakh steppe and its surrounding. This name is a compound consisting of the Russified place name and the place name in Kazakh. Its immediate surrounding is called Sarozerk, or Sary-ozeki, Kazakh for the yellowsteppe. In the outskirts of the Sarozerk is the Ana-Beiit cemetery, which means the Mother’s Resting Place (Aitmatov 1983, p. 185). This place is also known in the region as “the Sarozerk Pantheon” (Aitmatov 1983, pp. 124, 29). But Ana-Beiit has become ground for a space station, and thus the place also connects to the space odyssey of a joint US-Soviet mission.

Most fundamentally, though, Aitmatov’s The Day, is about what to do with a dead body, which in turn leads to the more abstract question of how to deal with death. The main plot is set as the main character Yedigei receives the news that
Kazangap, or simply Kazake among friends (Aitmatov 1983, p. 21), is dead (Aitmatov 1983, p. 13). What follows is the story about how Yedigei, fighting Kazangap’s closest relatives, namely his children, takes demand over Kazangap’s funeral and leads a ‘strange procession of camel, tractors and dog’ across the Sarozek to bury the dead body of his friend at the Ana-Beïit cemetery, which lies at least thirty kilometers away (Aitmatov 1983, pp. 124, 29). This story evolves over little more than a day and ends with Kazangap’s burial. This is only followed by a short epilogue where we get a short glimpse into Yedigei’s family two days later.

What makes this story last more than a day, is first of all the heroic story told by analepses about how Kazangap, Yedigei and their acquaintances survived through half a century at the train station of Boranly-Burannyi at the Kazakh steppe. This is an epic story where Kazangap’s life at the railroads serves as a miniature history of the Soviet Union from Stalin through the Second World War and the thaw period to the 1980’s. The starting point of this story seems to be the Second World War – but might also be taken as the heavy Stalinist persecutions of opponents in the 1930’s. The way the novel is told makes the reader reflect critically about what really kept Kazangap and Yedigei at the train station through a lifetime and how official Soviet history taught people, Aitmatov included, to blame the Second World War for everything.

Added to these stories are the mankurt legend and the space odyssey, the first of which reaches back to a pre-historic past, and the second of which leaps forward into the future. In addition to the spatial link that connects all these stories to Sarozek, there is also an interesting situational link that connects the mankurt legend to the main story. After having depicted the scene of people gathering to commemorate Kazangap’s death the narrator reflects: ‘Had not the great grief of Kazakh women been the inspiration of legend and song for their descendants for hundreds of years?’ (Aitmatov 1983, p. 39). Not only does the reference to legend and song here serve as a depiction of the women’s grief at that singular moment. The women’s grief also becomes a reference to the mankurt legend, which is to follow later in the novel.

It is important to see how these other stories contribute to the progress of the main story. As Kerstin Olofsson comments in a chapter entitled ‘Edigej – en ifrågasatt hjälte’ (i.e. Yedigei–a questionable hero):


The work encourages the reader to draw parallels between the present level – including both the here and now and the recent past – and the legends and the space odyssey, and hence yield a new, symbolic meaning. Even drawing parallels at the present level is of great importance. Different motives are systematically representing something beyond themselves (My translation from the Swedish original).

In the following several of these parallels will be discussed. My focus will be on the irony at play between the narrator and Yedigei, the ‘questionable hero,’ and how parallels both between the different stories and within the main story make us question his acts.
The main conflict

As soon as Yedigei hears about Kazake's death he establishes the conflict that permeates the novel from beginning to end. The following conversation takes place between Yedigei and his wife, Ukubala, right after she has brought him the news that Kazangap is dead:

“What about his children? That lot! Surely it’s our first duty to send them the news – but how? Their father’s dead…”

Yedigei frowned and looked even more serious, but said nothing. “Whatever they may be, they are his children,” continued Ukubala, in a tone of self-justification, knowing that it would be unpleasant for Yedigei to hear the words.

“Yes, I know,” he waved his hand, “do you think I don’t understand? I suppose we can’t stop them coming – but if I had my way, I wouldn’t let them near here!” (Aitmatov 1983, p. 15).

In this paragraph Yedigei acts like a raging camel. He ‘frowned’ when Ukubala mentioned Kazangap’s children, and he does not want them to take part in their father’s funeral. It is almost as if Yedigei does not recognize Kazangap’s children as such. Ukubala reminds him “they are his children.” This serves as a caution that Yedigei better treat them differently. However, Yedigei continues his hostile outburst against them.

At the first meeting between Yedigei and Sabitzhan after Kazangap’s death, Yedigei’s hostility towards the children seems at first to be forgotten as the narrator, applying Yedigei’s perspective, reflects on Sabitzhan’s attending at his father’s funeral:

But the fact that he had come to his father’s funeral, although he had not known for certain if his father was dead when he set off, already moved and even gladdened Yedigei. Yedigei was surprised at his own reaction. Embracing Sabitzhan and weeping, he found he could not control his feelings and said through his tears, “It’s good that you came, dear one: it’s good that you came” – almost as if by coming Sabitzhan could have resurrected Kazangap (Aitmatov 1983, p. 30).

As it seems, Yedigei’s affections take different paths, but his feelings toward Sabitzhan will soon turn back into hate when the question of where to bury Kazangap comes up. Yedigei wants to bury Kazangap at Ana-Beiit, the traditional burial place, whereas Sabitzhan wants him to be buried somewhere close to the train station. Applying Yedigei’s perspective again, the narrator tells us:

Finally there were no more tears to shed. They began to talk and get down to business. And that was when Yedigei realized that this devoted son was just the same know-all as before, and that he had not come for the worthy burial of his father, but only to get the job done, to dig a grave somewhere and leave as soon as possible. Sabitzhan began to express such thoughts: why take his father so far out into the steppe, to Ana-Beiit, with desert all around and nothing but he empty Sary-Ozeki steppe stretching as far as the eye could see? They could dig his grave somewhere here, not far away, on a hillock close to the railway. Then he could lie there and hear the trains go by on the line where he had worked all his life (Aitmatov 1983, p. 31).

It is not difficult to imagine how Sabitzhan’s suggestion to bury his father close to where he had lived and worked through half a lifetime, and close to where
Kazangap’s friends and children were still living, could have gotten quite another coloring with another perspective. However, the narrative’s perspective here is Yedigei’s perspective. That is why we, the readers, also understand it so well when we read Yedigei’s reaction to Sabitzhan’s suggestion:

He got up from his seat – there were five of them sitting on some old sleepers made into a bench beside the wall – and he had to make an enormous effort to restrain himself from saying anything hurtful or insulting before other people in such a day. Out of respect to the memory of Kazangap, he just said: “Of course there are other places close at hand, as many as you could ask for. It’s just that people don’t bury their dear ones just anywhere. Not without good reason, of course. No one would begrudge any plot of earth” (Aitmatov 1983, p. 32).

Even if we are made to share Yedigei’s feelings at this point, there are also notions that make us question parts of his reactions. For instance, the character Edil’bai is depicted as interfering in a much more respectful way with what Sabitzhan says, making Sabitzhan himself make the decision to bury his father at Ana-Beiit. All the same, Yedigei cannot resist the urge to make the final statement (Aitmatov 1983, p. 37). This episode makes Yedigei stand out as aggressive, and not as much of a given leader as the perspective in the mostly Yedigei-centered narrative suggests that he is. The way in which Yedigei takes command over the funeral is one of the aspects of the story that makes Yedigei stand out as a man of a certain will. By repeating how he asserts his will, the narrator makes the readers ask questions such as: Why is Yedigei taking command over Kazangap’s funeral? Why is this so important for him? What lies behind Yedigei’s decision and what is at stake for him when asserting it?

By raising these questions the text manages to lead the focus behind Yedigei’s dealing with Kazangap’s dead body, to the fundamental question above: What are we to do with dead bodies, or how are we to do deal with death? A naïve answer to why Yedigei takes command over Kazangap’s funeral is simply that he is the one who knows how to give Kazangap a proper funeral. So it seems through Yedigei’s perspective, but that is not the only interpretation available.

If we read The Day without implying any ironic distance between the narrator and the main character, what Kjeld Bjørnager, an early Danish critic of the novel, noted, is just right in stating:

Det er først og fremmest gennem Jedigejs karakter (dernæst Kazangaps og Abutalips og i negativ retning Sabitzjans karakterer), at de moralske normer i romanen åbenbøres, og man har en tydelig fornemmelse af, at forfatteren elsker Jedigej, med alle hans svagheder og al hans styrke (Bjørnager et. al.1987, p. 24).

It is primarily through Yedigei’s character (and secondly through the characters of Kazangap and Abutalip, and, in a negative direction, Sabitzhan) that the moral standards are revealed in the novel, and you have a clear impression that the author loves Yedigei, with all his weaknesses and all his strength (My translation from the Danish original).

However, partly by contrasting Yedigei’s story by other stories, the author creates a critical distance to Yedigei’s self-righteousness, which we will look at more closely in the following.

Establishing irony

If we return to the fundamental question, ‘what to do with a dead body,’ it is
striking to see how the novel portrays a time when death seemed to be something unusual. The depiction of a society that does not know how to deal with a man’s death might be seen as a critique of the materialist universalism that prevailed both in the Cold War’s East and West, where it shaped a whole generation growing up after the Second World War. The surprise effect that seems intended in the novel, might be hard to grasp for today’s readers, but must be read at the background of a common discourse in that time, when death had everything to do with victims and heroes of the second world war, and nothing to do with the post-war generation, which experienced a technical wonder that made people seem to live forever and conquer the universe.

In an early scene the narrator fixes Yedigei as the main character driven by a strong indignation towards the common attitude towards death, as seen in this dialogue between Yedigei and his co-worker at the tracks, Shaimerden. The pretty absurd conversation takes place at the radio set shortly after Kazangap’s death:

“Yedike, hullo, Yedike,” whistled the voice of Shaimerden, the duty man at the junction, “do you hear me? Answer!”
“I hear you, I’m listening.”
“Can you hear me?”
“I can hear you, yes, I hear you.”
“How do you hear me?”
“As if from another world.”
“What do you mean, from another world?”
“Just that.”
“Ah ... must be like old Kazangap himself.”
“What do you mean?”
“Well, he’s dead, isn’t he?” Shaimerden was trying to find something appropriate to say. “Well, what shall I say? He’s sort of, I mean, he’s completed his life’s journey.”

Shaimerden seems clearly helpless in dealing with death, and we see that Yedigei blames him for being a ‘brainless ox.’ The perspective applied here might imply that the reader sides with Yedigei’s moral stance: Shaimerden seems truly ridiculous in the situation. However, the mocking style that the narrator thus establishes towards people’s reactions on death seems to hit Yedigei as well. This creates an irony that runs through the whole novel. Because the main story, until Kazangap’s funeral, is told with Yedigei’s perspective, it is easy to see how everyone but Yedigei does ‘the wrong things’ after Kazangap’s death. However, there is something about the tone in the main story and something about the arrangement of the different stories in the novel as a whole that puts Yedigei under a critical spell. This is ironic, because Yedigei himself does not seem think that he might do something wrong when making very harsh judgments about others.

**How Yedigei and Sabitzhan relate to the mankurt story**
To get to the center of the story’s irony, we will take a closer look at the mankurt story, which serves as Yedigei’s ethical base. The mankurt story is a story related to a distant past and tells about the invading people of the Zhuan’zhuan, whose
habit it was to either slay their prisoners of war, or, by means of a specific torturous method, transform them into *mankurts*, i.e. make them loyal slaves bereft of any memory of their former selves (Aitmatov 1983, p. 122 ff.). This story ‘of evil memory’ evolves into the individual story of the mother of one particular of these mankurts, namely Naiman-Ana, who goes out to meet her son and remind him of who he really is (Aitmatov 1983, pp. 129-146). Their meeting has a devastating outcome. Even if the *mankurt* has no memory of his past, Naiman-Ana insists that her son should remember who he was. She cries out to him: ‘I’m your mother!’ (Aitmatov 1983, p. 138). Kerstin Olofsson regards Naiman-Ana as a positive element: Against the *mankurt* line of power that leads to memory loss does Naiman-Ana remember when all others have forgotten, she does not reconcile what others have reconciled (Olofsson 1988, p. 114). However, when seeing the consequences of Naiman-Ana’s lament, one might ask whether it is a positive or a negative element. The next day Naiman-Ana goes out to meet his son again. She cries: ‘Zholaman! Zholaman!’ and ‘Remember your name – please remember your name!’ [...] ‘Your father’s name was Donenbai’ (Aitmatov 1983, p. 143). The *mankurt*, still not recognizing his mother, is hiding in the bushes. He is told by the Zhuan’zhuhan to kill the intruder. When Naiman-Ana is hit by the fatal arrow, she falls forward. But the story relates that ‘just before her white headscarf fell from her head, it turned into a white bird, which flew away, crying, ‘Do you remember whose child you are? What’s your name? Your father was Donenbai! Donenbai! Donenbai!’ (Aitmatov 1983, p. 146).

In her resistance against memory loss, Naiman-Ana shows parallels to Yedigei who insists that Sabitzhan should bury his father at Ana-Beiit. The parallel between Naiman-Ana and Yedigei is further strengthened by the fact that Yedigei’s camel Karanar is said to be a descendant of Naiman-Ana’s camel, Akmaya. On the other hand, *mankurt* is a word Yedigei uses derogatively on Sabitzhan as it comes to a new confrontation between the two on the steppe. When they finally approach Ana-Beiit, it turns out that they will not reach their goal after all because the cemetery has been closed off by the space station. After Sabitzhan has repeated his wish to bury his father at the train station, Yedigei’s reaction is: “You’re a *mankurt*! A genuine *mankurt*!’ he whispered in his heart, hating and pitying Sabitzhan” (Aitmatov 1983, p. 348). After Yedigei insists on it, they bury Kazangap right where they are (Aitmatov 1983, p. 336).

Yedigei’s failure and the final twist of the story

The result of Yedigei’s strategy lies open for interpretation. Clearly his utmost goal was not reached since they could not reach Ana-Beiit, but surely he got his will over Sabitzhan, who wanted to bury his father at the train station. How are we to think about this outcome? Applying Yedigei’s perspective, we might think of Kazangap’s burial on the steppe, somewhat close to Ana-Beiit, as halfway successful. But considering Sabitzhan, the result seems as unfruitful as Naiman-Ana’s effort to save her child by repeating his name.

It is at this point of the story that Naiman-Ana cuts into the main story in the shape of an eagle flying over Yedigei while saying: “Whose son are you? What is your name? Remember your name! Your father is Donenbai, Donenbai, Donenbai, Donenbai, Donenbai ...!” (Aitmatov 1983, pp. 351-352). As these words are directed to Yedigei, they are easily read as implying that he is the *mankurt*.

We don’t know how Yedigei reacts to the question: ‘Whose son are you?’ At the
point where this question is asked, the narrative leaves Yedigei’s perspective, and the readers are left to reflect upon what this twist of roles might imply for Yedigei. Not only is Yedigei unsuccessful in giving Kazangap the funeral he wants, our hero is here even being dragged into the violent story of the invading Zhuan’zhuan and the mankurt. Rather than being a mere repetition of a haunting story about colonization and death on the Kazakh steppe, the question ‘Whose son are you?’ directed towards Yedigei, makes a surprising twist to the story, as he, Yedigei, takes the place of the mankurt. As he moves from Naiman-Ana’s position into the mankurt’s position, one question leads to the next: What memory is Yedigei bereft of? What identity is it that he neglects? The answer is already given by means of his own reflections through the novel: His father is Kazangap, his identity is Boranly-Burannyi, the name of the train station, the epithet of Karanar as much as of Yedigei, the symbol of the new, of the Soviet Union, of progress, refuge, periphery and colonization.

Conclusion

To sum up, the story about the mankurt, is both a story about the devastating meeting of the colonized and the colonizers, and the lethal meeting between the colonized and its ancestors that keep haunting them. For Naiman-Ana, just as for Yedigei, the insisting on a pure identity before colonization, is unquestioned and driven by forces beyond moral judgment.

One of the most central questions raised by the novel is what to do with dead bodies. The novel gives mainly two different answers concerning what to do with Kazangap after his death since Yedigei and Sabitzhan stand for two different strategies. Rather than coming to a conclusion on which of the strategies that are the best, the novel shows why this question is such a fundamental one: What we do with dead bodies define who we are.

References:


