



BOZKAŠĪ

BOZKAŠĪ (lit. “goat-dragging”) is an equestrian folk game played by Turkic groups in Central Asia. Its origins are obscure; quite probably the game first developed as a recreational extension of livestock raiding, much as rodeo in the United States grew out of the activities involved in livestock raising.

Forms of *bozkašī* vary considerably. The central theme, common to all forms, entails competition among mounted horsemen for control of the carcass of a freshly killed goat or calf. In northern Afghanistan, at least until the Soviet invasion of 1979, as many as several hundred riders could play at once in a form of *bozkašī* known in Dari as *tūda-barāʿī* (lit. “coming out from a mass”), common at celebrations (*tūʿī*) of circumcision and marriage. This traditional form is played in the open countryside, with no spatial demarcations. The objective is to grab the carcass from the ground while still on horseback and to ride with it until all other competitors are left behind and the carcass can be dropped in uncontested triumph. A single game cycle of this sort can last anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes. When a score is generally acknowledged, the rider (*čapandāz*), who typically is provided with a horse by a local notable (khan), is then presented with a prize (*sālem*), which once consisted of valued items such as carpets, rifles, and cloaks but now is usually cash. At the moment of presentation a jester figure called *joṛčī* launches into a stylized chant in praise of the horse’s owner. Meanwhile another cycle of play begins. In a day-long *bozkašī* of this sort, more than forty cycles may follow one another. Each has its own winner and prize and potential for dispute as participants frequently disagree on whether or not the carcass has been taken



free and clear and then dropped in a truly uncontested fashion.

There are no formal, uniformed teams in this traditional *tūda-barā'ī* version of *bozkašī*. Each horse-owning khan, however, is typically accompanied by an entourage of male relatives and retainers, euphemistically known as “friends,” who may act as an informal team in the course of play. Frequent disputes among horse-owners and their entourages constitute a second order of play: Who has really scored and, more important, who is to decide in such situations? In theory, the host or sponsor of the *bozkašī* (*tū'īwālā*) is invested with this authority. In practice, however, disputes may escalate beyond his control. The khans whose horses and riders participate in *bozkašī* are rivals not only in the game but also in daily life, and the game is thus understood as a kind of political microcosm. Whoever controls a *bozkašī* must, for all practical purposes, be politically powerful in the world beyond the game, and his power is enhanced all the more by this symbolic display. In this respect it is the host who has the most to win or lose. A successful *bozkašī* redounds to his political credit; a failure makes him liable to ridicule.

In the past several decades *bozkašī* has been variously transformed from a folk game to an institutionalized sport by the governments of Afghanistan, Soviet Central Asia, and China's Xinjiang province. The *tūda-barā'ī* free-for-all has been replaced by an array of strictly defined elements: delineated playing fields, a set time for play, uniformed teams, uniformed umpires, and clear-cut methods of scoring. In Afghanistan this form of *bozkašī* is known as *qarajāy* (lit. “black place”), referring to a painted circle where the carcass must be dropped for a score. Since 1953, a succession of Afghan regimes have sponsored annual *qarajāy* tournaments in Kabul. During the reign of Zāher Shah (until 1973), the tournament was scheduled to celebrate the monarch's birthday. Later regimes shifted the date first to United Nations Day and then to the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Each regime has used *bozkašī* much as a *tū'īwālā* used it in the traditional context: as a symbolic dramatization of its capacity to manage and control volatile events.

In 1970 Hollywood released a feature movie, *The Horsemen*, based on the novel by Joseph Kessel, about *bozkašī*, starring Omar Sharif, Anthony Quinn, and Jack Palance.



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