



KÖROĞLU I. LITERARY TRADITION

Linguistic diffusion

The Oğuz (see [ĠOZZ](#)) Turkic versions of the Köroğlu story are known among the Azarbaijanis (see [Azarbaijan](#)), the Turks of Anatolia, and the Turkmen, and they are most similar to each other regarding language and plot. According to the 19th-century Persian tradition (Chodźko, p. 3), Köroğlu was born in Khorasan, and known as a bandit minstrel in the Azarbaijani cities of K̄voy and Erzurum during the time of Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1588-1629). Yet Köroğlu's origin is also traced to Azarbaijan, the Caucasus (see [CAUCASUS AND IRAN](#)), or Eastern Anatolia. A Caucasian group of variants of the Köroğlu story includes versions in Georgian (see [GEORGIA](#)), Armenian (see [ARMENIA](#)), Kurdish, Lazgi, and Avar; an Azarbaijani group comprises versions in Turkmen, Tajik, Kazakh, and [Arabic](#); and an eastern Anatolian group has a variety of Turkish and Uzbek versions (Abbaslı and Cəfərev, p. 633). The Köroğlu story has changed in different lands, and in each place it has assumed characteristics relevant to the culture and political ideology of that particular place and people.

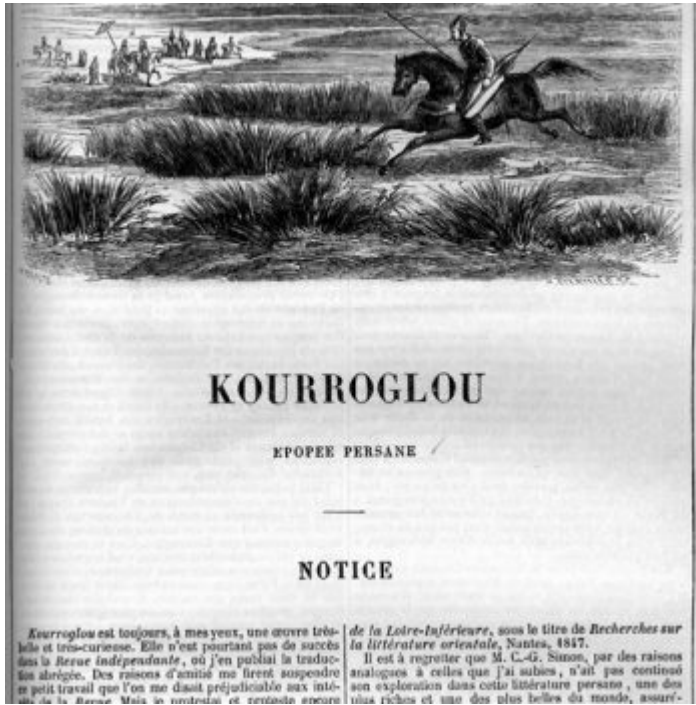


Figure 1.

The story and its variants

In all versions Köroğlu is a minstrel and poet who has revolted against the ruler's injustice, and his story is told in prose interspersed with poetry, or entirely in prose. In general, poetry from different sources was gradually added to the various versions of the Köroğlu story. The contents and the form of the Azarbaijani and Anatolian versions are closely related (cf. the literary genres *qoşma* and *türkü*; see [FOLK POETRY](#)), and in both the hero's name is Ruşen (Pers. *rovšan* bright). But in the Turkmen and Uzbek version, the hero's name is Guroğly (*lit.* son of the grave) because his mother had died before birth and her son was born in the grave.

The story of Köroğlu (*lit.* son of the blind) begins with his father's loss of sight. The feudal lord Hasan Khan blinds his stable manager Ali Kişi for a trivial offense by plucking out his eyes. Father and son leave the khan, taking with them the horses Kır-at (*lit.* pitch-dark horse) and Dur-at (*lit.* pearl-color horse). These horses are endowed with magic powers, since they were bred by a magician, sired by a legendary sea-horse, and reared in a dark place. Father and son stop on the slope of the mountain Çenlibel (*lit.* misty slopes; cf. Bakikhanov, pp. 181, 191), where they take a bath in the spring Qoşa Bulaq (*lit.* twin brooks). The spring's magic water endows Köroğlu with the gift of poetry



so that he becomes a minstrel (*‘āṣeq, baḳṣī*). After the death of Ali Kişi, Köroğlu buries his father near this spring, and eventually manages to bring Hasan Khan to Çenlibel in order to chain him in the stable. Köroğlu’s personal vendetta soon becomes a campaign against the unjust rulers of the region. He is a Robin Hood-type character who fights oppressors and takes from the rich to give to the poor. As his fame begins to spread in the region, more and more people who are dissatisfied with their rulers and ready to revolt join him in his mountain headquarters. Āşıq Junun, Eyvez, and Kosa are just a few of his many well-known followers. More than once Köroğlu’s small detachment suddenly attacks a city or fortress and defeats a huge garrison of enemy soldiers. Afterwards Köroğlu’s followers celebrate their victory in his inaccessible mountaintop fort.

Women, who are often the daughters or wives of the local khans, have a special place in the Köroğlu story. They are so fascinated by the bravery and democratic behavior of Köroğlu and his followers that they become their wives. Köroğlu’s beloved Negar has left her noble family, and she is Köroğlu’s companion in his quest for justice, as well as a motherly figure for all members of his band at Çenlibel.

In the Anatolian version Köroğlu’s father is named Mirzabey, the cruel lord Bolubey (*lit.* governor of Bolu, a town between Istanbul and Ankara), and Köroğlu’s headquarters Çamlıbel (*lit.* pine slopes). On the basis of the proper names Bolu, Çamlıbel, and Ruşen, it has been argued that the story originated in Anatolia, from whence it spread to the north and the northeast, and that the Turkmen version is secondary (Boratav, p. 912-13).

Historical context

In most versions Köroğlu is a leader of an early 17th-century Jalāli revolt (Wilks, p. 315 n. 4), during which a rebellious group in eastern Anatolia fought for more than 30 years against the Ottomans and their local representatives (Abbaslı and Cəfərov, p. 634). In the Erzurum tradition, the names of Gürcü Mehmet Pasha and Cāfar Pasha correspond with those of two late 16th-century Ottoman officials, while in the Kars version the latter is named Cevher Pasha (Boratav, p. 913). Between 1575 and 1585, when Özdemiroğlu Osman Pasha (d. 1585) led the Ottoman campaign against the Safavids, there was a chief called Köroğlu, but whether this is the same Köroğlu is not certain (Yener, p. 368). The famous Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611-82) was in Anatolia and in the Caucasus around 1650. He mentions that the stories about Köroğlu, a bandit minstrel of the Jalāli tribe, were well known in Anatolia. On



the occasion of the execution of the leaders of a Jalāli rebellion near Lake Iznik, a minstrel was brought to the Ottoman sultan. This man reminds Evliya Çelebi of Köroğlu, “who was an extraordinary *chogur* [a type of long-necked lute instrument] player and no one could compose poems like his” (Evliya, V, pp. 7, 196; cf. Bakikhanov, 1970, pp. 181, 191; Ra’isniyā, pp. 144-45).

The Armenian historian [Arak’el of Tabriz](#) (d. 1670) provides a list of Jalāli leaders who pillaged and plundered the countryside in Anatolia and Armenia during the days of [Shah ‘Abbās I](#) (r. 1587-1629). Among these men Aruak’el mentions a poet: “K’or-oğli—this is the same K’or-oğli who composed many songs, which are now sang by minstrels —[rebelled]. Gzir-oğli Mustafa Bek, with 1,000 men [rebelled]. He was a friend of K’or-oğli, who mentions him in many songs” (I, pp. 70-71, cf. II, p. 514). The Safavid historian [Eskandar Beg Torkamān Monši](#) (d. ca. 1633) also mentioned that the Jalalis, whom he described as a branch of the Takalu tribe, revolted against the tyranny and injustices of local rulers in Anatolia (II, pp. 765-66). Yet in a Georgian version of the epic (Chlaidze; cf. Alakbarov), Köroğlu and his men fight against Shah ‘Abbās I. Pertev N. Boratav (1907-1998) has argued that on the basis of the currently known archival documents all versions can be considered stories about the same Köroğlu (1967, p. 913). The minstrel who between 1584 and 1585 accompanied Özdemiroğlu Osman Pasha on his Safavid campaign also participated between 1587 and 1591 and again in 1602 in Jalāli rebellions. Boratav speculates that the Ottomans pardoned the Jalāli rebel, though he later reverted to his old way of life.

The Azarbaijani scholar Vaqif Valiyev (pp. 31-35), however, has argued that the Jalali bandit chief was not identical with the poet who lived in Azarbaijan. The Turkish historian Fuat Köprülü (p. 52) mentions a 16th-century poet of folk tales (see [DASTĀN](#), [DASTĀN-SARĀ’I](#)) with the name Köroğlu, and considered Eyvez, one of the companions of the famous Köroğlu, a poet. The Turkish scholar Ergun Sadettin Nüzhet (pp. 244-45; cf. Abbaslı and Cəfərov, p. 635) saw Köroğlu as a [divan](#) poet who flourished during the time of the Ottoman sultan Murat IV (r. 1623-40) and died in 1654.

Other men with the name Köroğlu are mentioned in historical sources, but these are not also remembered as poets and minstrels. During the reigns of Shah Ṭahmāsb (r. 1524-76) and Shah ‘Abbās I, the rebellious Turkmen chief of [Kosrov Sulṭān Guroğlu](#) lived in the mountains of Kerman (Ra’isniyā, p. 152). The Oghuz [Kosrov Sulṭān Guroğlu](#) is remembered as one of the killers of [Şāhqoli Beg Ostājlu](#), the Safavid commander of Khorasan during the reign of



Shah ‘Abbās I (Ḥasan Beg Rūmlu, p. 631). As late as the end of the 20th century, in the era of the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamit II (r. 1876-1909), Köroğlu was the name of a famous bandit chief (Boratav, pp. 913-14).

Western literary adaptations. The Polish poet and orientalist [Aleksander Chodźko](#) (1804-1891) was the first to translate and study the Köroğlu tradition, when he served between 1832 and 1834 in the Russian consulates in Tabriz and Rasht. His Persian/Azeri Turkish Köroğlu manuscript is held today in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (MS Suppl. Persan 994; cf. Wilks, pp. 309-310). Chodźko published this research in English in 1842, and already in 1843 the novelist George Sand (1804-1876) published a French translation in several installments in *La revue indépendante* as “Les aventures et les improvisations de Kourroglou” ([FIGURE 1](#)). The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) adapted a single episode in his poem “The Leap of Roushan Beg,” which first appeared in 1878. Longfellow describes how Köroğlu is chased by his enemies when his horse Kyrat stops at the edge of a precipice in Kurdistan. A 30-foot chasm yawns in front of them, and Köroğlu talks to his horse: “O my Kyrat, O my steed, / round and slender as a reed, / Carry me this peril through!” The horse takes a giant leap and saves him from his enemies.

Western musical adaptations.

The story of Köroğlu also inspired musical works. Chodźko (pp. 583-84) included in his literary study Anthony de Kontski’s *Persian Air* on the tune of the Köroğlu improvisation, set for piano. Particularly important is the opera by the Azarbaijani composer Uzeir Hajibekov (1885-1948). The Azarbaijani author Mammad Said Ordubadi (1872-1950) based his libretto on the popular Azarbaijani version of the story, and its theme of a peasant revolt against unjust khans meshed perfectly with the official Soviet ideology. Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), who may have known a Georgian version of the Köroğlu story, attended the opera’s first performance in 1938, and is said to have greatly admired the work. This opera was the crowing achievement of Hajibekov’s career, though some critics claim to recognize criticism of the Soviet regime, under which Hajibekov had considerably suffered.



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