

Kok-Boru: Tradition, History and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Kok-Boru, an equestrian sport deeply intertwined with the cultural heritage of Kyrgyz nomadic people, it has transformed from a ritualistic practice into a professional sport recognized internationally. With its roots in the ancient hunting practices and warrior training of nomadic Turkic people, the game has evolved into various forms, which remain culturally significant today. As Kok-Boru continues to gain international recognition, particularly through events like the World Nomad Games and inscription in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under UNESCO's 2003 Convention, it faces numerous challenges such as gender imbalance, animal rights concerns, and over-commercialization. Additionally, the high cost of horses required for the sport and the ongoing internal disputes over rules between countries further complicate its growth. Despite these challenges, Kok-Boru remains a symbol of Kyrgyz identity and resilience, reflecting the strength of its nomadic roots.

Keywords: Kok-Boru, equestrian sport, Alaman-Ulak, warrior training, totem, martial arts, intangible cultural heritage

The deafening roar of the crowd breaks the stillness of the air, sparks of joy and pride sparkle in the adrenaline-filled eyes of the fans. The air is saturated with a mixture of sweat and the tart freshness of the earth. The hooves kick up dust, that swirls in the soft rays of autumn sun, turning into a misty curtain through which dozens of rearing horses rush. Pupils dilated, nostrils burning like hot coals, they fly like wind carrying their riders in traditional skullcaps with whips clenched in their teeth. At that very moment the whole world disappears for both of them except for the flickering carcass in the distance. Their heart beat in unison – their souls merging into one swift movement.

Kok-Boru is a traditional equestrian game of the Kyrgyz, also widely known as Ulak-Tartysh (Goat Dragging), Torpok-Tartysh (Calf Dragging), Alaman-Ulak (Crowd Goat Dragging), and Jer-Ulak (Ground Goat Dragging) across Kyrgyzstan. It is a highly competitive, fast-paced, and physically demanding game played on horseback. The objective is for two teams, or individuals *ulakchys* – players during Alaman-Ulak, to compete over a goat carcass (or a calf carcass in the case of Torpok-Tartysh, where *torpok* means calf) and attempt to place it into the *tai kazan* – a large circular pit used as the goal. The standard professional team consists of 12 players and 12 horses, while in traditional crowd games, up to thousands of players can participate. The game is played within a set time, and the team or individual player that scores the most points by successfully throwing the carcass into the goal wins [5]. Kok-Boru represents the highest manifestation of the spiritual bond between a man and his horse and is a core element of Kyrgyz identity.

Kok-Boru was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under UNESCO's 2003 Convention in 2017 [15]. However, the inscription process as well as Kok-Boru's past, present and future have its fair share of challenges can be better understood by examining its overarching historical, spiritual and cultural significance for the Kyrgyz people.

I. Country profile



Image courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica

The Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked country in Central Asia, lying between the Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. It borders by Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the southwest, and China to the east. Approximately 94% of the country is above 1,000 meters (m) elevation, and 40% is above 3,000 m. Over 80% of the country is within the Tian Shan mountain chain and 4% is under ice and snow. Kyrgyzstan is farther from the sea or ocean than any other individual country in the world [19]. With a population of around 6.5 million, the Kyrgyz people take pride in their history and intangible cultural heritage that is reflected in their indigenous

knowledge, epic heritage, customs, rituals and practices, traditional music, cuisine, games and craftsmanship, particularly in felt-making and weaving. The Kyrgyz culture is both vibrant and resilient due to people's strong connection to their nomadic roots, especially their undeniable bond with their horses – the wings of the Kyrgyz. However, the Kyrgyz today are striving to maintain a delicate balance between tradition, religion and modernity in the face of rapid global changes.

II. Origin and History

There are a number of various versions as to the roots and origin of Kok-Boru among communities, practitioners and researchers, but many agree that the game's history goes back centuries and is based on the indigenous spiritual beliefs, hunting practices and warrior training culture of nomadic Turkic people. The name of the game is self-descriptive and invites reflection. *Kok-Boru* means Blue Wolf, where *kok* – blue and *boru* means wolf. According to elders and cultural practitioners, the wolf, or Kok-Boru, holds a central place in the spiritual life of the Kyrgyz and other Turkic peoples. It is considered a totem animal and a messenger of *Tengri*, the sky god [2]. The sacredness of the wolf as a totem is also reflected in the Kyrgyz epic trilogy *Manas*, where it is depicted as a spirit protector – *the kyrk chiltens*, or forty guardian spirits of *Manas*. The wolf was seen as a protector and guide, symbolizing strength, resilience, and leadership [4].



Image credit: Kiyiz Duino, via official Facebook page

According to other beliefs, the goat, or *ulak*, was originally a sacrificial animal offered to the guardian spirits and the Creator, as the goat is traditionally considered a messenger of the underworld [1]. Indigenous practitioners in Altai believe that Kok-Boru was originally a ritualistic performance in which ancestors mimicked the hunting and social behaviors of

wolves. The wolf pack's qualities, such as loyalty, teamwork, and leadership –were manifested in the game, teaching players the values of responsibility, cooperation, and non-aggression within the community [2].

Another belief holds that in the predominantly warrior culture of ancient nomads, Kok-Boru likely evolved from a ritualistic practice related to hunting and military training, where the behavior and hunting techniques of wolf packs were mimicked. This practice served as a training ground for warriors to develop their horsemanship, leadership, strength, agility, endurance, resilience, coordination skills, as well as military tactics, strategic planning, and teamwork. Most importantly, warriors strengthened their bond with their horses, which were considered extensions of their bodies and wings of their souls [3]. These skills were essential for survival and combat in warfare. The game is also believed to have been part of military rituals, where participants showcased their skills by competing for an animal carcass, symbolizing victory and conquest [4]. However, another popular belief among the general public suggests that Kyrgyz nomads used to fend off wolves that frequently attacked their herds in the mountain pastures by chasing them down, beheading them with a wooden stick, and tossing the carcass from one rider to another, hence comes the name's reference to a wolf. Later, of course, this wolf-hunting practice eventually evolved into a traditional horseback game, with the animal carcass changing from a wolf to a goat, becoming known as Ulak-Tartysh [7].

The field notes of notable Russian ethnographers from the early 19th century demonstrate that Kok-Boru was played during significant events such as weddings, mourning ceremonies, and large social gatherings. It played a central role in social life, uniting communities and reinforcing social bonds. The game transcended its origins as a ritualistic practice and became a key element of Kyrgyz national identity, carrying strong social and cultural significance [8]. However, along with other traditional cultural practices, Kok-Boru faced certain challenges under the Soviet rule, as part of its efforts to modernize and control the cultural practices of local indigenous communities. Despite the Soviet regime's tireless efforts to suppress it, the game's cultural significance resiliently endured. Kok-Boru communities continued to safeguard its practice in rural areas just enough for it to experience a revival after the disbandment of the USSR. A new chapter for Kok-Boru began with the introduction of new rules, most notably the requirement of throwing the goat carcass into a goal, called *tai kasan*, on a field similar to a football pitch. This idea, initiated in late 1996 by the brilliant filmmaker Bolot Shamshiev, helped formalize the game and make it more structured, particularly for official competitions and championships [20]. Nevertheless, the traditional form known as Alaman-Ulak also continued to thrive alongside the modernized version.

III. Kok-Boru's Variations and its Resemblance to Martial Arts



Image credit: Alain Schroeder, via Sputnik Kyrgyzstan

The Kok-Boru players – *ulakchys* – believe that the spirit of the game runs in the blood of the Kyrgyz people and is the essence of Kyrgyz cultural identity, that inevitably manifests itself in one way or another over time [18]. In today's globalized and highly technological society, given the game's cultural relevance and enduring popularity among people of all ages, the *ulakchys'* statement might hold true.

Today, the internationally recognized version is the classical Kok-Boru that is played on specially prepared hippodromes with standardized and defined rules and teams of professional players on specially trained horses competing against each other. Each team has 12 players and 12 horses with 4 players from each team taking the field at a time with a possibility of player substitution without stopping the game. The game is played over a set period of time, usually 3 sets of 20 minutes with 10-minute break in-between. The team that scores the most points by successfully throwing the carcass into the goal wins. There are specific requirements for the weight of the goat carcass as well. The standard size is 32-35 kg, but provided the playing field is muddy, then the weight can be reduced to 27-30 kg. Classical Kok-Boru is played during official tournaments, championships and cups at the national and international levels as a professional equestrian sport [5].

The traditional version of the game is Alaman-Ulak (*alaman* – crowd/mass, *ulak* – goat), which involves a large number of players, sometimes up to 2 to 3 thousand players at a time. As a rule, Alaman-Ulak is played over a vast field to accommodate the number of participants. The rules are less formalized with no teams competing against each other. In Alaman-Ulak anyone who wishes to play can try, from amateurs to professionals of all ages, can join, and each player

competes individually to win the prize. The player who scores a certain number of goals by throwing the goat or calf carcass into the pit is declared the winner and receives the designated prize [13]. The goat carcass used in Alaman-Ulak is slightly heavier than in classical Kok-Boru – about 40 kg. Sometimes calf carcasses are also used that weigh up to 80 kg. It is one of the most popular forms of Kok-Boru played during major events, celebrations, anniversaries, and festivals. The game can be organized by local communities or individuals celebrating life events and serves as an excellent example of traditional community self-organization. It is customary for community elders to bestow their blessings on the players and chant prayers before the game begins. As a rule, after the game the goat meat is cooked and shared by the community [14].

Although Kok-Boru may not be thought of as a martial art that is, as a system devised for hand-to-hand combat or self-defense, it can nevertheless be viewed as a martial practice in terms of its historical role as a method of training for warriors that demanded high level of physical training and put great emphasis on discipline, teamwork, and combat-like skills [6]. Riders needed to practice controlling their horses, and horses learned to interact while engaging in close-quarter struggling, just



Image courtesy of Kok-Boru Federation via official website

as warriors would on the battlefield. The game can be seen as a form of ritualized warfare whereby men and their horses could simulate battle conditions and hone their reflexes and strength [3]. Since Kok-Boru is a forceful and contact-driven game where players literally grapple and wrestle with each other to get the carcass of the goat, resembles common techniques of similar to martial arts, especially those that specialize in throwing and grappling. The wolf is a symbol of leadership, strength, and protection, and playing Kok-Boru was a means for participants to assume this role, much like how martial artists strive to embody the ideals of their own disciplines. Thus, the emphasis on physical mastery and the symbolic connection to combat that originated in ancient warrior cultures give Kok-Boru many qualities akin to those of classical martial arts [10].

IV. Kok-Boru's Challenges: Past and Present

While Kok-Boru might be popular among the general public in Kyrgyzstan and be a source of pride, it raises certain concerns and controversies as viewed by the international community. There are grave disagreements among members of the International Federation of Kok-Boru that continue seriously to beset them. According to some ICH experts, the initiative of the concerned communities to inscribe Kok-Boru in the Representative List of intangible cultural heritage of humanity was, in effect, shrouded in controversies and disputes among countries which share Kok-Boru as common cultural heritage in attempts to ascertain its international

recognition. In the case of Kok-Boru, shared cultural heritage might have individuated countries, rather than united, all because of the element's deep cultural and social significance.

It was during the examination and evaluation process by the members of the Intergovernmental Committee that the nomination file for Kok-Boru underwent significant scrutiny and critical attention because of the concerns over its intrinsic risk potential to the players and horses lives. Whereas the *ulakchy* or the players voluntarily chooses to engage in the game with full knowledge of its danger, the horses do not have that choice and knowledge. According to the experts, Kok-Boru celebrates a form of toughness verging on cruelty and reflects a utilitarian view and use of animals. It was emphasized that as a form of traditional entertainment, it contains too many elements reminiscent of warfare and combat. However, these challenging and serious concerns notwithstanding, the Kok-Boru's ritualization of fierceness and strength utilized in physical confrontations, like in many martial arts, is regulated by rules and codes of conduct. Although the game might seem to be chaotic and even have elements of expressed aggression, nevertheless it is governed by a shared understanding of honor and sportsmanship, when all the strength and fierceness is channeled into a controlled, respectful framework. Thus, Kok-Boru was inscribed in 2017 as a traditional horse game and cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan [9].

The inscription of Kok-Boru in the Representative List has significantly enhanced its international recognition, underlining its importance as a sign of Kyrgyz nomadic culture. The recognition increased the role of Kok-Boru in international competitions, especially in the World Nomad Games, a cultural and competitive highlight. The heightened visibility meant that Kok-Boru has gained international attention to promote the sport and the continuity of the Kyrgyz traditions and heritage onto the international arena. However, with the growing international popularity of the game, the Kok-Boru communities face serious challenges to balance traditional aspects of the game with the modern demands to standardize the rules to mirror the international sport standards and eliminate the use of the real goat carcass due to ethical concerns. Additionally, there is an ongoing internal disputes over the rules within the members of the international Kok-Boru federation, namely Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with former advocating to shorten the match time and the remove the *tai-kazans*, allegedly for safety concerns. However, Kyrgyzstan, as the most important and leading nation behind Kok-Boru's popularity, is strongly against these changes, arguing that they will rob the game of its essence and entertainment aspect. But compromise is necessary for Kok-Boru to continue growing in popularity in other parts of the world [11].



Image courtesy of Kok-Boru Federation via official website

With the increased professionalization of Kok-Boru and its players, there are concerns of its becoming too commercialized. The increasing prize money, sponsorships, media attention and establishment of professional leagues have certainly raised visibility for the game, but there is a danger of turning it into a commercial event, robbing it from its cultural roots and community-based spirit. For example, at the 2016 World Nomad Games, the

prize fund for Kok-Boru reached up to 40,000 USD, a significant sum in Kyrgyzstan, which has led to concerns about the impact of large monetary incentives on the nature of the game [21]. This growing commercialization has sparked debates about how to balance modernization with preserving the cultural integrity of Kok-Boru. Another challenging aspect of growing professionalization – raising demand for high-quality, which are quite expensive to acquire. It might result in disparities where the richer teams will have a competitive advantage over the others since they may afford better horses. The small teams will be on the disadvantage trying to be at par with the others. Excessive horse prices intended for Kok-Boru are a problem for many players, especially when the sport is being professionalized more and more. A horse intended for Kok-Boru needs to be really well-trained, agile, and strong because it withstands very heavy work during the game. That's what makes it expensive; the price is upwards of \$15,000 USD [10]. The great prices make such horses, which are themselves elite athletes, out of the reach of many players, especially rural players. The cost of training, feeding, and maintenance further raises financial barriers for players and teams alike. If we take into account the lack of adequate infrastructure and opportunities for training in rural areas, then over professionalization hinders the growth and development of Kok-Boru at the grassroots level.

Kok-Boru being a traditionally male-dominated game, one of the most noticeable challenges which it faces today is gender imbalance. Although Kyrgyz women also grow up alongside horses in traditional households and master horseback riding, women have always remained excluded from the game with men. This imbalance in gender affects the sport to turn more inclusive while balancing the strong traditions within the sport. However, there are emerging stories of young girls challenging this male-dominated practice and breaking social and cultural norms, which gives hope for a more inclusive future of the game [12].

The Kok-Boru's future depends on its ability to embrace inclusivity, navigate commercialization, and address ethical challenges, all while holding onto its rich cultural significance as a reflection of Kyrgyz history and identity. As it continues to evolve, Kok-Boru has the potential to grow into a global sport that remains true to its roots, ensuring the continuity of a cherished nomadic tradition.

Image courtesy of Turmush.kg



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