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**ХОЁРДУГААР ХЭСЭГ:
НҮҮДЭЛЧДИЙН ТҮҮХ,
НИЙГЭМ, СОЁЛ**

MANAS EPIC PERFORMANCE RITUAL

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Abstract: This essay describes a ritual performed during the telling of the Kyrgyz epic Manas. The performance of the epic has a ritual character, as this process involves the creative and spiritual preparation of the narrator as well as his relationship with the audience and the environment, thus creating a single living communicative form between the human and non-human world of spirits. The epic Manas is one of the largest epics in the world and is a historical encyclopedia of the life of the Kyrgyz people revealing many complex relationships that stimulate the socio-cultural practice of the people. The first mention of the epic is found in a collection of works in Persian written in the XVI century by Mullah Saif ad-Din Aksikendi. The exact dating of the appearance of the epic is unknown. Traditionally, the epic is told by narrators, talented people who undergo a special rite of passage into the art of storytelling. This epic is characterized by the fact that it is always performed by a live narrator, still preserving its traditional form of oral folk art. The Manas epic has passed a difficult way of survival, for example, in the Soviet period the telling of the epic was not welcomed as a relic of the past and was under strict censorship of communist ideology, in modern times in the post-colonial period the epic and narrators were under pressure from radical representatives of various Islamic religious movements, who also flatly deny and do not recognize the epic heritage. Nevertheless, the epic is one of the brightest forms of national identity in Kyrgyzstan modern day, and narrators have the status of respected people. In this study, I will explore how epic performance is realized today as a ritual process in its traditional expression.

Keywords: ritual, Manas, epic performance, storytelling art, environment, sacred world, liminality, ancestral spirits

My research question is how the process of telling an epic as a ritual process takes place, what stages it goes through, who is the narrator, and how the telling of an epic should be understood from the point of view of ritual realization. I also consider the question of socio-cultural character, what exactly is the ritual of Manas epic storytelling, what is its cultural peculiarity and originality. I construct a description and understanding of the ritual based on my interviews with one of the young narrators, Kulmat Sydykov (b.1985), who lives in Kyrgyzstan. I also use my field notes, conversations with the audience, and most importantly,

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participant observation. In this ethnographic analysis I prefer to proceed mainly from my own observations and from my own understanding of the ritual process, but always checking with Kulmat's opinion on this or that action during the telling of the epic. As an insider, I had the opportunity to quickly get involved in this process and be a part of it, without diverting attention to myself and my attempt to realize the shooting of a short film about narrator.

The art of storytelling as a ritual phenomenon has been insufficiently explored: one might say that there has been practically no large-scale research specifically devoted to this area. However, there was an experimental attempt to study the altered states of consciousness of the audience and the narrator during the telling of the epic, which may perhaps resonate with my theme to some extent. This work was carried out by epic historian, local kyrgyz scholar Talantaaly Bakchiev and his colleagues in 2011. His work describes the results of biochemical, bio magnetic and other physiological indicators obtained from audience members during storytelling. This experiment voices the opinion that the performance of the Manas epic has a transcendental nature that cannot be rationally explained. But since I am looking more at the anthropology of the ritual of telling the epic, I am basing it on the field material of my ethnographic research that I conducted between 2021–2023. Therefore, I used the theories of the following anthropologist to analyze my material, who gave me the opportunity to reveal and explain the ritual performance: Arnold Van Gennep, E. Durkheim, V.Turner, T.Asad, W.Keane, S.Mahmood, L.Kendell and others. Next, I describe my ethnographic experience, then move on to analyze the ritual and draw my conclusion.

How to become an Epic Narrator: The Story of Kulmat

Kulmat was born in a little mountain village in the west of Talas province. This region is in the northwest of Kyrgyzstan and borders southern Kazakhstan. In the epic, Talas was chosen as the stake of the protagonist Manas, from where he ruled his domains. Kulmat grew up in a traditional family, his father spent his life raising livestock, he often played the traditional horse game Kok-Boru (heavenly wolf). Therefore, Kulmat grew up practically on horseback, because herding a herd of livestock in the winding mountainous terrain is only made possible by a horse. Because of which Kulmat, like his father, has a close attachment to the horse. Kulmat notes that one of the reasons why he became a narrator is connected with the image of the horse.

However, before he became the narrator of the Manas epic, he proved himself at a young age as a very talented singer of folk songs. After finishing school, Kulmat went to the capital, where he studied to become a financier. This period

for him became a process of physical estrangement not only from the village, but also from his native cultural environment. Kulmat later recalls that his life in the city was a great challenge. But the turning point in his life happened after graduation, when his father, while playing kok-boru in the village, suddenly died from a fall of a horse, the horse's body crushed his master to death. This tragedy forced Kulmat to end his city life, give up his dream of becoming a successful banker and return to his native village. There his widowed mother, a large herd of cattle and his domestic chores were waiting for him. From that moment his journey as a narrator begins.

Kulmat is very active socially, even physically he manages to do various practices ranging from fasting to practicing qigong and tai chi. When he was young during his years of study, he was impulsive and not constant. Now his status has changed, as a narrator he is no longer allowed to show weakness in his character. Since he has a responsibility not only to the people who listen to his rendition, but also to the spirits of the ancestors.

My first encounter was 2007 in Bishkek. At that time Kulmat and I were members of a local youth organization that once a week held open discussions on Kyrgyz proverbs. At each meeting, one proverb was put up around which there were discussions, interpretations and various decodings of its meaning and possibility of how it could be used in our lives. At the beginning of 2000 in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Russian speech was still very prevalent, and the city's youth practically spoke only Russian. I was a newcomer from another small town in the country, as well as Kulmat, who mostly communicated with each other in Kyrgyz, thus expressing our protest against total Russification on the one hand, and on the other hand to support our national identity. At that time, Kulmat and I did not have a very close relationship, although we were members of the same organization and shared the same values. He transferred to the capital's school from the village and graduated in the city. One day he was badly beaten up by Russian guys in a computer club where he worked as an administrator. He was shocked not by the fact that he was badly beaten, but by the fact that such an incident was possible in the capital, where the majority of residents at the time were already Kyrgyz. This is how long, and relatively recent Bishkek youth defended their borders, Kulmat recalls, but now it is hard to imagine such a thing. At that time, he was enterprising, spoke fluent Russian, actively tried to learn English and sang and performed at various musical events. He always had a short haircut, clean to shine shoes and often liked to wear a classic denim jacket. From the looks of it, you could say quite a city boy. But ironically now he looks quite different, his image now exactly matches the status of the manaschy.

Our strong emotional shock happened in 2010, on April 7 during the people's revolution, as I mentioned above more than 80 guys were killed in the central Ala-Too Square in Bishkek. They were shot by hired snipers from the roof of the white house, which was besieged by protesters, mostly young people. The order to shoot them was given by the highest representatives of the authorities at the time. I and Kulmat were in the thick of these events. This bloodshed took place before our eyes. I remember the crowd separated us and we lost each other, but later our guys told me how Kulmat tried to ram the northern gate of the white house with a tractor that was brought to break through the iron gate, but every time who tried to do it was shot. Kulmat was miraculously fished out when he tried to get on the tractor. Later he himself recalled that he was under the influence of some unknown force, and he did not feel any sense of fear. The next day only came the realization that he was on the verge of death and was gripped by an overwhelming fear. The provisional government, which took power that night, instructed our youth organization to organize the funeral of 84 young men at the national memorial complex "Ata-Beyit" where Chingiz Aitmatov is also buried today. Later Kulmat received the state award of the hero of the April Revolution for his selflessness. After these events, Kulmat soon returned to the village to start his new life and experience a completely different fate, the fate of a *manaschy*.

In the case of Kulmat, I had, and still have, friendly relations. What it is like to be a friend of a narrator, answering this question, I would say not easy. Because even then, when he lived in the city, it was difficult to understand some of his actions. He was really talented to the point where his head would go when he held a *komuz* in his hands. Then he could easily forget an appointment or just be late or, for example, forget to lock the door at home. He always had a kind of irresistible hunger for creativity, and his attention was sometimes beyond his physical reality. He was always on the lookout for something, when he picked up a *komuz* or told even if a short, learned passage from an epic he would calm down. Everyone close to him said the city wasn't for him.

Place, Initiation and Ritual

It was the spring of 2023. I went to Talas, which is a 5-hour drive from the Bishkek capital city. As I mentioned earlier this region is famous for being the place of an epic hero in times past. The purpose of my trip was to take part in a live performance of the *Manas* epic, which was accompanied by a certain set of rituals and ceremonies. This region has its own live performers people call them *manaschy* it's a Kyrgyz term for an epic narrator. There are not so many of them, probably 5-6 people in a region. One of them is Kulmat. The place of his initiation into the sacred world of the *Manas* epic is considered by local people to

be the holy place Arashan-Ata². Every “true”³ manaschy receives initiation into this traditional form of performance, which is accompanied by the acceptance of a special gift of the narrator during the first initiation. The source of this gift is considered to be the world of *kaiyp*, which means the divine or spiritual space where the highest spirits of ancestors with certain spiritual powers dwell and send their blessing and support to their descendants. It is believed that the narrator is under the observation and influence of spirits from this world of *kaiyp*. Only in this way they have the rights (permission) to claim themselves as a manaschy. The main and perhaps the only reason for a person’s initiation into the art of storytelling is a dream. The dream is the reason for becoming a manaschy - which is considered the starting point. No one knows who can become one. It is decided as they say in the people through the will of the *Tenir*⁴ or *Jaratkan* (creator).



Picture 1. Kulmat in the sacred place of Arashan-Ata, where he received initiation into the storytelling art

And so, our hero Kulmat received such a dream and then initiation. After the initiation the local people gave him a new name, Kutman, which means a pious man. His process of initiation or transition from an ordinary man to a manaschy lasted more than 40 days. He spent the days of his initiation alone in this sacred place, without food or people. He was only allowed to drink water and yogurt. Of course, he lost a lot of weight. As he told me he had purified himself almost to his bones. His body at one time became so stinky that he could barely stand the smell. Each narrator has his own personal story to tell. But almost everyone goes through a similar initiation scenario. Among the obligatory attributes are the following: sleep, solitude and cleansing, the first narration, visiting sacred places that are related to the epic hero Manas, going out to the people these are usually rural people. After the narrator begins his journey, he usually devotes his whole

² Many holy places in Kyrgyzstan are named after famous ancestors or holy people. Arashan means – spring and Ata means – grandfather.

³ Epic tellers are usually divided into two groups, those who are true ones who have received blessings from their ancestors, and those who memorize texts of the epic in advance and perform.

⁴ Traditional name of God in Turkic and Mongolian-speaking peoples of Eurasia.

life to the telling of the epic. His social status, his former habitual way of life and, in a sense, even his character change. The status of a storyteller has among the Kyrgyz people the highest degree of gift in traditional art. Since the gift has a divine source that descends from the sacred world of the epic, the manaschy becomes to some extent a conductor or intermediary between the sacred world where the spirits of epic heroes' dwell and the profane world of people.



Picture 2. Kulmat performing the epic

I arrived directly at Kulmat's house in the evening. In the morning, we had breakfast and drove to this sacred place where he was receiving his first initiation. We were accompanied by my cameraman, driver and young disciples of Kulmat, as well as a representative of the local government, who was also a friend of Kulmat's, total 10 people. Before the trip I agreed with him that I would come, and I wanted to listen to him and make a short portrait video. He immediately agreed, because we had known each other for a long time, and he trusted me. The only thing he asked me was that I should really attune myself to the trip and seriously intend to listen to the epic.

And so, we arrived at the sacred place Arashan-Ata. It was about 4 pm. I had purchased groceries before the trip, mostly bread, milk and *airan* (yogurt). The narrator said that I am the main "customer" or "cause" of this gathering, so the spirits of the sacred place and the spirits of the ancestors will demand attention from me. And the first gesture of attention is to provide an offering. This is usually food. Since I came from far away, I bought already prepared food at the store, but usually they require that the food be prepared at home. The more effort you make to placate the spirits of the ancestors and the master of the sacred land, the more opportunity you open up to receive support and blessing from them. I took

the two large bags into the small house in this sacred place, where people usually gather and prepare ritual food or just lunch. I set the table. But before that, we all did ablution according to Muslim traditions. This is a mandatory requirement in almost all sacred places in Kyrgyzstan. That is, you have to enter clean into this sacred ground. After that everyone sat around the table covered with treats. Kulmat first read out the Quran⁵.



Picture 3. Ritual food and ritual participants at the sacred place

The recitation of the Quran and the ritual meal was dedicated to all common ancestors, saints and the owner of the sacred place. In such cases, people usually read several surahs in the Quran, the version most common in Central Asia. This is the first of the visible acts that opens the way to ritual immersion, but it is of a general nature. Any ritual action usually begins with the recitation of a passage from the Quran. The recitation of the Quran took 10 minutes. This action declares to the sacred world the intention to give respect and honor to the ancestors, as well as a request to accompany and support the ritual that is beginning. The food after the recitation is usually not left behind, it is eaten entirely by the participants themselves or taken home as already consecrated food and shared within the family.

After the reading of the Quran and a light meal, we went deeper into the sacred place. This place occupies about 20 hectares of land, quite spacious. It is in a gorge, with high Rocky Mountains all around and a river flowing nearby. Because of the height of the mountains, the sun goes away quickly. This holy place consists of several water springs. The power and specialty of this place lies in these springs. Local and visiting people go to pray in these places, fill

⁵ A short particular excerpt from the holy book of the Muslims.

water bottles and take with them. They believe that the water springs are not only healing, but also helps to convey their prayers to God. The chemical composition of the water in those springs has not been studied to prove them right or wrong. We quietly and carefully approached the springs and took turns from the eldest to the youngest to drink the water. This spring has the shape of an oval and slowly flows out from under the mountain at the foot of which it is located. It is forbidden to step over the spring, so usually only one person goes to the spring and gives water to everyone in turn, each time filling it with a mug that was already there.

The water was so cold that my eyes immediately opened, and I felt a rush of vigor. Kulmat was not talking to anyone at this time. He usually has a cheerful nature. But when he begins to enter the narrator's state he changes noticeably. We sat down around the spring. Kulmat put his hands palms up to the sky and began to pray. In this way he asked permission to perform the epic with the intention that his tale would be accepted by the spirits of the heroes of the epic and from the master of the area. This happened very quickly. I expected the performance of the epic to happen right here and now. I asked for the camera to be prepared. But Kulmat suddenly decided that the performance of the epic should be by the fire. This he explained by saying that his intuition told him so. There is a special zone in this sacred place where ritual fire is allowed. On the way back to the fireplace, each of us picked up a dry branch to throw there during the fire. It happened intuitively. The trees in this place grew thickly, so it was not difficult to pick up dry branches.



Picture 4. Ritual bonfire

It was getting dark. The sky was red in color. Kulmat gave the signal to light the fire. It was about 7 o'clock in the evening. Besides us, several other people

came up. They were regular visitors to the sacred place, among them was an aged woman wearing a white shawl. People here often go to holy places. So, it was not surprising for us to see other people in such a remote place from the city. In such ritual performances, the right to light the fire is given to the woman as the keeper of the hearth (but this custom is not always observed) who is the oldest in age or who has a higher social status than other women. Kulmat asked the woman in the white shawl to light the fire. She already had a special preparation - white absorbent cotton soaked in ghee. She had already started the fire, and since she had come to the place of fire, she was ready for the ritual of kindling. The fire started well, Kulmat said it was a good sign. Then he added that we should keep an eye on the fire and not let it go out. We did so.

Kulmat adjusted his traditional headdress, which was made of felt. He was dressed warmly, wearing a traditional dark-colored *chapan* (outer garment like a robe). He sat down on a place of honor. A place of honor is considered to be that place which is opposite the entrance, regardless of the cardinal direction or the movement of the sun. That fire also had its own entrance. So, it was not difficult to determine which side was the place of honor. Men sat on the left side of the entrance to the fire, and women on the right side, such a division is not necessarily observed in recent times, but usually in such places people try to follow the customs as much as possible.

The mood of the participants was elevated, we were all strongly anticipating this moment. This state can be characterized as collective effervescence, as all participants in this ritual process expressed awe, and were on the same emotional wave. Further, this collective effervescence develops during the process of storytelling itself, where there is a dynamic movement of people's psycho-emotional state in a certain direction under the influence of some force from outside. (Durkheim 1995) My cameraman carefully positioned the camera so that he could not be seen clearly. Otherwise, he would have invaded the narrator's personal space, which we were told was forbidden. Before starting, Kulmat asked everyone seated what episode to tell from the epic. Since the epic consists of a trilogy *Manas*, *Semetey*, *Seitek* is a story about the main character, his son and great-grandson according to the legendary Kyrgyz manaschy Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971) the epic about half a million lines of poetry, which is quite a large story within which there are many story lines.

Usually, all manaschys ask their listeners at the beginning what exactly to perform, it is such an unspoken tradition. It is explained by the fact that the narrator lives and performs the epic for the people, so the people have the right to order him a certain theme from the epic. Nobody said anything. Then I suggested

to him that he should choose an episode himself. Kulmat chose an episode about horse races, where Kanykei⁶ participated in the races after the death of her husband. She was in exile and participating in the horse race gave her an opportunity to rehabilitate herself and establish justice. This is one of the most dramatic episodes from the epic. It is impossible not to cry. Some of us let the tears flow. Kulmat narrated the epic for about 40 minutes continuously. It was a very emotional performance. He was visibly sweating, unbuttoned his robe. The headdress moved to the back of his head. During the narration he often wiped white foam from his mouth with a handkerchief.

His eyes were closed the whole time. At the end he became quiet, that meant he had finished his story. It was already night. As soon as he finished, I went over and handed him a cup of warm tea. Everyone sat in silence for a long time with their eyes on the fire. It was time to return. Kulmat thanked the spirits of the ancestors, the spirits of this land and allowed listeners to get up from their seats. Usually after the end of the hearing the participants thanked the narrator. But on this day, everyone had a long time to get away from the state of involvement in the process and expressed gratitude on the way home. As the main initiator of this meeting, I thanked Kulmat later, with an envelope of some money. In fact, Kulmat works as a teacher at school, he teaches a lesson on the musical instrument *komuz*⁷ and also teaches children how to narrate *Manas*. In general, many narrators in Kyrgyzstan try to work somewhere to support their families. Because narrating an epic does not always bring enough money to live on. *Manaschys* do not ask for money for telling the epic, if one of the listeners wants, they can donate.

The Meaning and Significance of the Ritual

The audience of this evening was more prepared, as many of them had experience in such ritualized processes of epic performance. To listen to the narrator in such a remote place goes with certain goals, which concern various kinds of issues ranging from solving the inner mental dilemma of a person or to the search for mental and physical health. Thus, this evening the participants made a pilgrimage to the holy place to search for answers and solutions to certain problems, in which the narrator played a key role creating the culmination of the whole ritual process, which began long before all the participants got to the sacred place Arashan-Ata. Among the participants was the head of the region, the head of the region is directly appointed by the president of the country and reports directly to him. He was after work, which means that despite his high official status he was dressed in casual clothes without a tie and just like everyone else

⁶ The wife of the epic hero *Manas*

⁷ Traditional three-stringed plucked musical instrument of the lute type with a long thin neck.

equally shared the meal and sat there as an ordinary person of his age. I know him well he was also well acquainted with the manaschy. As the head of the region, he had a very important decision to make. Before he became the head of the region, he had actively opposed the extraction of resources in the country especially gold. The explanation was that the government was too corrupt, and the people did not get their due and fair share from the mining. The president instructed the head of this region to officially open a new gold mine that belonged to a foreign company. The reason he came to the narrator's hearing was to solve this dilemma, as his future career depended on it and his future fate was at stake. After the ritual, I didn't get a chance to talk to him. But after some time, we heard that he refused to open a gold mine, because of which he was immediately removed from his position. And later, for other political reasons, he was imprisoned. Now he is still in prison. How much influence this ritual evening had on his decision making I don't know. But if he had asked Kulmat what to do in his case, he would have said unequivocally that he was against destroying the local ecosystem and angering the ancestral spirits and hurting the mother Earth.

The head of the region was not verbose, he listened to the narrator very attentively, it was felt that he was pleased to be in this atmosphere after the hard work, which, in addition, greatly disturbed his sense of justice. The woman in the white shawl represented a local informal community that practiced rituals to purify spaces and to invoke the spirits of ancestors and masters of certain sacred places. As she said for her the manaschy is a carrier of powerful purifying fire power, which opens the way for many and ennobles the space around her. During the epic performance she was concentrated in herself and fell into a light trance. My cameraman had his first experience in such an atmosphere of telling epic. Later he told me how as a child he had experienced a sense of vision (of the future, of the state of people) and during the storytelling he felt strongly about the same feelings that he had not experienced for many years. From then on, he and I began to have long conversations on this subject and tried to reflect the mood or state of the manaschy through creative documentary. Because we set out to reflect as much as possible the inner state of the narrator's transition through visual art. Participating in the process of listening to the epic, my cameraman and I filmed simultaneously, which gave us the opportunity to use different visual points of view. Later I realized that visual art allows us to capture subtle moments during ethnographic work, which are sometimes difficult or impossible to write about as a text.

If the audience was even bigger, it would mean as many reasons and problems with which people would come - to find a certain answer to their questions, to

find consolation, to gain willpower, to hear the voice of ancestors, to reformat the brain from routine tasks of everyday life, to recover mentally and psychically or just to sleep and see some signs in their dreams, or at least to meditate on the fire and soundscapes of the epic performance. In short, the narrator with his art fulfills a complex and multilayered task as a symbol reflecting the sacred world.

This ritual of epic storytelling represents a whole complex of interactions between the manaschy and the audience with the sacred world of the epic and with the territory where the performing process takes place. In this context, as famous ethnographer Arnold van Gennep defines it, there is a series of ritual acts of the narrator's transition from a secular to a religious state, in other words, from the profane world to the sacral world (1960). The key role in this ritual picture is played by the narrator, who is also the living symbol of the embodiment of the sacred world of the epic (Turner 1967). How accurate it would be to call the soundscape of musical recitation a dominant symbol, since the narrator's art is expressed through the verbal symbolism of the meanings of words and sounds. The whole semantic context of storytelling is built around the word and text itself and its transition into language sound. Since the text comes spontaneously in the moment, it always has a narrative meaning and metaphysical sense. In addition, it should be noted that storytelling as a ritual action is not tied to a particular material-physical object. But this process is individual for each case, which is determined by several conditions (e.g. the level of perception of the audience or the readiness of the manaschy) and the depth of realization of the ritual.

For example, if the state organizes a large festival concert and invites, say, a narrator (who did not receive the dream as an object of truth), this performance can hardly be called a ritual. It will be a declarative concert number having more civic value. Since it loses a number of important ritual elements, such as the rites of separation, liminality and incorporation (Gennep 1960). The rites of the narrator's transition from one state to another is not fully accomplished in the case of the state concert. But this does not mean that the narrator's art in this example loses completely its effect as an element of expression and reflection of the sacred world. Many manaschys themselves say that even mechanistic performance can manifest the power of the sacred world, but only to a certain extent. It should be noted here that the language of the epic itself acts as an instrumental symbol, since the language in which the epic is told already has a certain power and opens the first veil of the sacred world before the audience. According to some of my interviewees, even at state concerts a certain transition of consciousness is felt in some listeners. But this is not a full-fledged transition into the sacred world.

As I mentioned earlier, the formation of the narrator takes place through

initiation in a dream, where the future performer receives permission and blessing from the spirits of the heroes of the epic. According to Kulmat, the sacred world of the epic is ordered and not abstract, it is the same real world, which is invisible to us, but has a great influence on people's lives. The world of outstanding spirits of ancestors is designated by the term *kaiyp* which I mentioned above to put it more deeply it is a special dimension in which the heroes of the epic stay as living spirits who can patronize their descendants. Prominent Kyrgyz epic teller and scholar Talantaaly Bakchiev gives the following explanation of the phenomenon of *kaiyp*:

“There was an opinion among the people that those who once left the world of the living and went to the world of *kaiyps*, whether they were heroes or saints, in extremely exceptional situations and circumstances, when the people were threatened with danger, could appear in the world of the living to help their people, to stop the danger, to establish justice. Just as in the epic, the Kyrgyz people did not consider the representatives of this world to be dead, they considered them disappeared, invisible, immortal, and therefore eternal powerful spirits. The Kyrgyz also believed that at critical moments in the life of the people they could be called upon. In the epic, the first to pass into the world of the *kaiyps* is Semetey⁸ with his catching bird Akshumkar, his greyhound dog Aktaygan, and his war horse Taibuurul.” (2019: 23)

The narrator's relationship with the sacred world of the epic has a pragmatic purpose, which is expressed through the purposeful performance of the epic text. It is worth noting here that the sacred connection of a true *manaschy* takes place within the higher spiritual world of *kaiyp*. The *kaiyp* was created by God's design and it is considered compatible with monotheism, in which all the heroes of this sacred space honor Tengri as a single god⁹. Thus, the narrator fulfills the role of an animator between the sacred world of the epic and the world of people. In this sense, the language in which the text of the epic is told is the medium through which the relationship with the spirits of the epic's characters is realized and their presence is realized to a certain extent (Keane 1997). This connection has force when the narrator addresses a prayer to the spirits of the ancestors before the tale is told, often invoking the names of the epic's protagonists to bless the upcoming performance. The specific indication of the addressee in Web Kean's view is a meta-pragmatic act in which a stronger connection to the divine source is established and witnessed (1997). Below is a short excerpt where Kulmat appeals to the spirits of ancestors to support him before telling the epic:

⁸ The son of Manas

⁹ For Kulmat, the word Tengri equally also means Allah, it is just a different name for the same single god.

O, creator Tengri, the master of the universe!

O, great ancestors, glorified by magnanimous Manas!

O, our great ancestors Bakai, Koshoi, Almanbet, Chubak and Syrgak!

O, great spirits who inhabit this land and Arashan-Ata holy place!

All of us honor you and bow our heads, we ask for your support and protection from every evil word and evil eye!

I ask that all the prayers of those present be accepted and blessed by you!

I ask you to open the way for me and bless the upcoming storytelling!

It is a recognized fact that the source of a text or its linguistic form comes from the sacred space of the *kaiyp*, is the narrator then considered to be merely a mediator of this transmission? The answer to this question is controversial, but many true *manaschys* agree that they are also the authors of the text they perform. This is a fair assertion, since historically, each true *manaschy* tells his own version of the epic in one way or another. Kulmat explained to me that the text comes during the narration not literally, i.e. not letter to letter. The narrator falls into a certain trance state where he finds himself in a stream of consciousness beyond his individual capacity (Keane 1997). At this point, his speech abilities, as well as his accumulated baggage of epic knowledge, are translated into a coherent and artistic text. In the words of the narrator: “It is as if we are seeing the same movie, but each narrator then retells the movie in his own way.” The pragmatic potential of the narrator, which is expressed in the knowledge of language at a high level, physical data and the form of recitation gives the right to be the author of that linguistic form or stream, which has a divine source, as the narrator works out in his mind the sacred signal and gives out the original text, well, or as Atkinson and Metcalfe correctly note: “spirits and shamans as co-producers of the text” (1989, 1989).

Ritual Ontology

The process of realizing a complete transition from one state to another is of great interest to both the narrator and the audience. Before analyzing the rites of passage, it is necessary to give some clarification about what the sacred world is and how the narrator’s relationship with the sacred world is organized in the context of my example. Briefly, the concept of the sacred world comes from the traditional worldview, which is now called “*tengrianism*” or “*kyrgyzchylyk*”, a belief in a dualistic world, which was created by a single creator Kok-Tengri (Blue Sky) or Jaratkan, centered on the cult of ancestors, the cult of Mother

Nature and the underworld. Well, the phenomenon of *kaiyp* in this picture of the world as I mentioned earlier takes a key place as a divine space of special purpose, where the living spirits of outstanding ancestors stay. The *manaschy* is the person who has access to the world of ancestors and has the right to tell the epic - which accumulated all the values and principles of life into a unified system of knowledge (in the form of a life story of the *Manas hero*). In this context, the mission of the narrator is to build a bridge and strengthen the connection with the spirits of the ancestors (between secular and sacral), in this case the world of *kaiyp*, which fulfills its role as an expression of the divine will.

Durkheim writes that without defining a belief it is difficult to determine the nature of a rite (1995:34). Given that the narrator's worldview is based on belief in a creator (pre-Islamic belief) and at the same time on monotheism (Islamic religious belief), since Kulmat was also a follower of the Central Asian Sufi order, the rite of his personal transition was more "religious" than magical. The initiation of *manaschy*s has an institutional character that resembles more a religious form than an accidental magical phenomenon. In the case of Kulmat the power of the gift of the narrator was integrated into the Islamic mystical religious system, or vice versa, Islamic religious elements were integrated into the narrator as part of his cultural and religious identity. For example, when he first went through the stage of symbolic death (Durkheim 1995:37) or the initiation process into the world of the narrator he stayed for more than 40 days in a liminal period, where he had to starve and abstain from the benefits of the material world. It was a long and arduous process from getting rid of the attachments of the profane world. He was physically exhausted and weak; his actions were a humiliation to his ego. But at the same time, he was acquiring sacred power, and a great number of people gathered around him at the end of his liminal period. This process of initiation into the religious world of storytelling many people from his entourage later called the word "*40 chiltan*" which means according to mystical Islam (Sufism) the patronage of spirits over a neophyte or a person who passes the liminal period (Nurtazina 2009). And so Kulmat was accepted into the sacred world of the narrator. The symbol of his final transition from the profane world to the sacred world was the moment when he was given a new name. It meant that he was reborn. But here there appears an interesting moment, which is well described also by Durkheim (1995:35), when the neophyte passes the transition from the profane to the sacred world, there appears a separation of these two worlds which then develops into conflicting sides to each other, as the narrator is forced to be reincorporated into the secular world.

In other words, Kulmat did not completely separate himself from the profane

world otherwise he should have become a monk. Kulmat returned to the profane world after his initiation. Then come the rites of passage, which carefully guide the narrator's entire life between the thin line of the two states without great shock or damage to himself or his audience, because the narrator is responsible for himself and his listeners. In Kyrgyz society, the majority believe in the divine origin of the epic, so the manaschy for them is not just a performer, but also a bearer of virtues, since he is close to the source. The narrator's disciplinary program is complex in that it prescribes a number of ethical standards. The narrator in everyday life must live as a righteous man, vigilant to hone his moral qualities (Mahmood, 2001:832). When I first called him with a request to organize an epic performance, the only thing he asked me to do was to get serious about the process. This means that the transition into the sacred world must begin with the observance of step-by-step ceremonial actions in order to realize a full-fledged "religious" and ritual action or transition. This was not only required of me as a participant, but also of the narrator himself in the first place. Without full rites of passage, the process of epic telling could become quite mechanistic or failed. The chain of transition took place from the following rites of passage:

1. Intention, inner attunement of oneself
(the process of separation from the profane world)
2. Purification bodily and mentally through physical effort - in my case it was a 6-hour drive through a mountain pass by car and ablution (liminal period).
3. Drinking water from a sacred spring, listening to a manaschy around a ritual fire (the process of incorporation into the sacral world).

My arrival in Talas, then moving to the sacred place Arashan-Ata in the mountains, the rite of ablution, making an offering to the spirits of ancestors through a meal, visiting the spring, then organizing a bonfire, all these actions were done for the sake of full inclusion in the sacral world of the narrator.

Each participant of this process definitely came with his own questions or problems. Usually no one talks about it openly. It is not even customary to ask each other who came with what request. But everyone understands that in addition to their personal requests, there is also a need for deeper religious or spiritual socialization. In this respect, the narrator fulfills several roles at once, including as a symbol of a unified cultural, spiritual and social identity. With his voice, the musicality of his recitation, his gestures and his very presence, he provides a favorable and trusting environment among the participants for an easier and faster transition of the state of consciousness. Ritual form can create a

unified congregation by regulating vocal and bodily movements, and emotional effects may transform individual's subjective state. (Keane 1997:53) We should not forget that the natural environment, local landscape and the atmosphere itself in this situation also predisposes the participants to a smoother unity. Thus, here we see the formation or emergence of a special psycho-emotional state of this group of participants that Victor Turner called *communitas* (2009:94).

“The collective product outside the volition of any particular storyteller, the participants take this unity to manifest the presence of a single divine source.”

(Szuchewycz 1994, Borker 1986 in Keane 1997)

Choosing a Particular Episode from the Epic: Part of the Ritual

The choice of a theme from the epic during performance also plays a very important role. As it directly influences the meaning and direction of the mental collective identity of the gathered group, which is expressed by a certain visionary and deep attunement of religious consciousness and thinking. That is, the theme denotes the general context, but it is not yet the content of the specific case where the epic is performed. In addition to the very content of what the narrator says, a meta-plot is formed, which happens precisely in the moment, in other words, a super-content is born that acquires a certain religious/visionary power thanks to the deep-seated mood of the participants and to the power of the narrator. In such cases, ritual transcends its rational presence through a collective altered state of consciousness that can be called a genuine spiritual experience. Signs of such a phenomenon can be visions, strong feelings on the physical level, complete oblivion or a meditative state, expression of deep emotions, release, acquisition of certain sensory abilities.



Picture 5. Panorama of the Talas where Kulmat lives and the main holy places are located

Returning to that meeting I still believe that this ritual evening could not but influence the fateful decision of the head of the region regarding the gold-mining plant. Why Kulmat chose this particular part of the epic, where he told about the dramatic story of Kanykei, aroused my interest. In response to this question, Kulmat told me that he does not choose which episode of the epic to tell. The choice of episode is the will of the spirits, and they in turn look at the audience and the particular occasion in which the epic is told. In other words, the audience unconsciously chooses the episode depending on their intentions and expectations.

“The efficacy of ritual or sacred speech may stem from the fact that it originates from those to whom it speaks, something that gives the speaker special authority or persuasiveness, or places the listener under special obligations” (Keane 1997:59)

Kulmat further explains that the Kanykei episode is usually told before some vital choice or before the beginning of some great undertaking. Kanykei's horse Taitoru according to the epic must come out first. If the narrator himself stops in the middle of the road, it means that it is better to delay or postpone the decision of some choice or the beginning of the case for a better moment. This episode is a sign of upcoming events.

Emotions as Markers of Ritual Success

Emotions in the process of telling an epic are present in a significant way. Emotions are expressed by both the narrator and the audience. What is interesting is that they both have the same tones of different emotions from love and anger to grief, thus forming a single mental-psychic state. The manaschy manages emotions, as emotions are caused mainly by the content of the text, but these emotions are not chaotic, they are directed depending on the theme of a certain episode, have a logic of development. If the text itself sets a certain passive emotional tone, the narrator adds appropriate emotional colors to this tone and then the story comes to life, i.e. a certain success is achieved. Sometimes at some point the manaschys stimulate emotions in order, on the one hand, to attract the attention of the audience, on the other hand, to give confidence in the story. In other words, to give the process of telling more performativity and audio-visual colors through the voice, facial expressions, body movements and hand gestures. Passive manifestation is not about the telling of the epic Manas. A similar phenomenon is well described by Laurel Kendall when she talks about the Korean shamanic initiation ritual *kut*. According to her, the neophyte or student must express his confidence and strength through strong emotional statements, assertions of himself in order to receive attention and blessings from the spirits to

become a shaman. (2009) The narrators, if at the beginning of their journey they were shy and timid, then each time they gained confidence, this was expressed in their ringing voice and in their balanced, calm behavior. In adulthood, almost all manaschys acquire a strong character and a strong will - this is the key to a successful narrator.

But do emotions always lead the process? On the one hand, in my example, strong emotions are allowed and even welcomed. But as I noted earlier, all these emotions manifest themselves and live in the context of the performance space. In this space, in theory, there are no random emotions outside the epic telling context. I could say emotions are in a sense controlled by the super-plot. Usually, when an epic is being told, the audience must behave quietly; it is forbidden to walk or move excessively during the telling. The episode and sub-themes provide specific cues for the outward expression of emotion. This is usually a collective simultaneous exclamation, screaming or crying. In a sense, emotions are accomplished in this conventional process, where there is a certain mental discipline. (Mahmood 2001:828) Thus through the telling of the epic an alternate reality is formed where the story told in the text is experienced by the listeners. Kulmat in his interviews often mentioned how some of his listeners often cried. In the narrator's opinion, this is a clear sign of the authenticity of emotions, of the inner transformation of a person. The text of the epic has a religious nature, which directs the listener to reproduce in their consciousness of certain psycho-emotional constructions that release a person, makes a person experience through the expression of genuine emotions of specific life situations that are described in the epic. It is as if all the heroes of the epic are reflections of the different human essence that is present in each person nature, and it is as if the person experiences himself in an alternative reality by identifying himself with the images of these epic heroes.

Strong in Spirit, Physically and Morally

Many manaschys say that the Manas epic belongs to the people, the people are the true author of the epic, and the people can only evaluate the authenticity of the tale. If the people accept the narrator, it is a great success for the narrator. Since the people let the narrator near their secret, any lies and immoral behavior on the part of the narrator is inadmissible. Accordingly, the narrator even in his daily life is under unobtrusive surveillance by the society.

This suggests that the manaschy must follow a disciplinary program that obliges him to observe certain ethical rules. Kulmat tells me that in addition to conforming to society's expectations, the narrator must also understand whether

his actions are in accord with the requirements of the spirits. And this implicit control extends not only to the time of storytelling but also to daily life. Influential Western anthropologist Talal Asad describing medieval Christianity writes that the disciplinary program links outer behavior and inner motive, forming a coherent personality and showing closeness to the divine source (1993: 63-64).

This accurately describes the process of long-term preparation of narrators for their vocation through a specific disciplinary program. This program involves not only the education of virtues, but also physical training. Manaschys are strictly prohibited from drinking alcohol, smoking and committing adultery. Failure to comply with these instructions is punishable by deprivation of the gift or other social and physical problems. The routine for the manaschy, where he observes a certain discipline, is carried out through frequent appearances to the audience, pilgrimages to holy natural places, communication with people as an opportunity to hone his eloquence and wit.

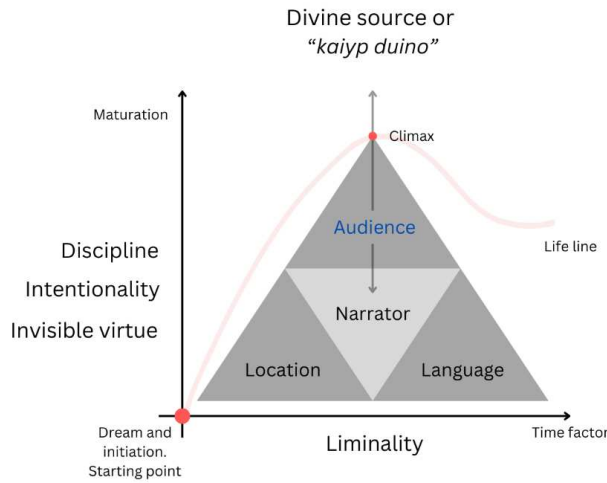
This is a completely practical and intellectual type of activity, as Asad described, playing a regulatory role in maintaining the status of a storyteller, as well as in instilling virtues.



Picture 6. Morning exercises are part of discipline

Each ritual has its own dominant symbol, around which the entire architecture of any ritual custom is built. (Turner 2009) Since epic and manaschy are an element of an intangible phenomenon that does not have external material attributes. The only material-physical presence is the manaschy himself, who embodies the entire architecture and content of the ritual. In my mind the symbol is born during epic performance; the performer, connecting text and context in a

particular time and place, forms the semantic meaning of the epic's storytelling.



Author's diagram of the ritual

The symbol is deciphered depending on the context and the specific case, thereby revealing the canvas of the semantic meaning of the ritual. Because a symbol has real meaning only when the narrator is connected to the world of kaiyp (divine source) and gives the audience a sense of the presence of the sacred world through his speech and recitation, otherwise the performance may be figurative or a mere concert number devoid of ritual meaning.

Conclusion

As a result, we get a certain structure of the ritual, which consists of fundamentally important sociocultural elements and external factors such as the environment, which in turn, like puzzles, are assembled into a single semantic picture during the implementation of the Manas epic performance. This structure can be roughly visualized in the diagram below.

In the ritual of telling an epic, the central place is occupied by the narrator himself, who sets this whole process in motion. The first condition for a performance to acquire ritual significance is to perform it in a suitable place. In general, the epic could be performed in one way or another wherever possible, but since we are talking about the ritual side of the performance, the choice of location plays a key role. In the case of Kulmat, he chose the sacred place of Arashan-Ata; according to him, the spirits of this place (the owner of the place) also contribute to the favorable performance of the epic, and the spirits of the ancestors prefer a pure field (away from the bustle of the city). And if it is a

sacred place, then it is an ideal choice for telling an epic.

We also need to keep in mind that in order to take part in this ritual, all participants must make certain efforts and go through the process of separation from their usual secular world into the sacral world. The second condition of the ritual is the presence of the soundscape of the epic, where the main role is played by the language in which the epic is performed. Language in this case is the main way of transmitting information. Language also plays a connecting function between the manaschy, the audience and the divine source in order to obtain the presence of the spirits of ancestors. The narrators believe that the Manas epic should be performed in the Kyrgyz language, the essence of which is, firstly, for mutual understanding between people and the spirits of ancestors, and secondly, to resonate with the local natural environment and cultural context. The use of language as a tool can also be understood as a desire for integrity, in which the boundaries of the secular and sacred worlds are blurred.

The third condition of the ritual is the presence of a certain audience for whom the epic is performed. The desire of the audience to listen to the epic is the main reason for telling the epic. Since the epic as a ritual phenomenon belongs to the people from whom it comes and returns back to them through the narrator. But it should be said that the manaschy can also tell the epic without an audience if he wishes. In this case, as the narrators say, there is a release of energy, a renewal of energy as part of their storyteller training, they also believe that a single telling epic into the air is also important, since the space is thus charged with the energy of the sacred world. It turns out that the audience is not only the main recipient of the benefits of the ritual, but also as a social unit reproduces culture, contributes to the maintenance of traditional relationships and values and strengthens social cohesion. The Kyrgyz scholar Talantaaly Bakchiev cites many stories of the art of storytelling, where, during authentic and powerful storytelling, transformations occurred at the individual level among listeners, people were cured of their illnesses, life became easier in difficult times, sudden weather changes occurred, for example, heavy rain poured, thunder, a strong wind was blowing or snow was falling, etc. (2017)

To some extent, this can be explained as the culmination of the process of telling the epic in the presence of ideal conditions, but first of all, in the presence of personal preparation and the strength of the gift of the narrator himself. From this it should be said that a true narrator who has undergone initiation and received the gift of storytelling art finds a new destiny and future. He begins to develop sensory abilities, he can not only heal people with his speech, but also predict the future and interpret dreams, bless people, and open roads for them.

Therefore, they do not go through an easy path, constantly improving themselves, maturing from within, following a certain self-discipline. Thus, telling the epic is a traditional ritual process, which has its own cultural characteristics, social and spiritual practice, its own ontological reality and a unique history of existence.

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