

Reflection Paper - Culture and National Identity

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The above picture, taken on the 10th of November 2019, shows Ala Too Square in the center of Bishkek. Depicted are the State Flagpole, the Manas Monument, and the Kyrgyz State Historical Museum. This photograph shows elements of Kyrgyz culture. Culture, as defined by Johnson (1996), is “the sum of symbols, ideas, forms of expression, and material products associated with a social system” (p. 20). The photograph shows the Manas Monument and the Kyrgyz flag, which are symbols, and the text on the monument as a form of expression.

Both the flag on the State Flagpole and the Manas Monument are symbols representing (at least part of) Kyrgyz culture and carry historical meaning. The flag is based on traditional symbols: yurt design (the tunduk), and the number of tribes that used to exist in Kyrgyzstan (the 40 sunrays). Additionally it is the flag of the Kyrgyz Republic and symbolises it. The Manas Monument depicts Manas, a figure of traditional Kyrgyz oral epic poetry. He symbolises this tradition of storytelling and a story of how people used to live before Russian colonization. The inscription on the monument in Kyrgyz makes it a Kyrgyz monument. The language contains historical influences, thus it is a symbol for Kyrgyz

history. For example, the Cyrillic script being imposed under Soviet rule or its Turkic origin. As such, the flagpole and Manas Monument combine many Kyrgyz symbols: history, language, and oral epic traditions.

The arrangement of these structures on the central square in Bishkek shows their importance for the people that constructed them. This is due to the importance of what they represent: the Kyrgyz state, history, language, and oral epics. These cultural factors are important for the formation of a national identity. From a functionalist perspective, a central state, common language, and traditions are functional for the creation of a Kyrgyz national identity. These features and culture will make it easier for citizens to identify with the state and other citizens. The monument and the flagpole are positioned in the center of Bishkek because their initiators wanted to put them and what they represent in a public and significant place to promote Kyrgyz national identity.

The creation of a Kyrgyz national identity is also the focus of Andrew Wachtel's paper *A Tale of Two Heroes: Kyrgyzstan in Search of National Role Models* from 2016. This paper argues that Manas and Kurmanzhan Datka, who are also part of Kyrgyz culture, are currently used as national heroes to build a national identity in Kyrgyzstan. He explores why these two were chosen for this purpose and what the implications of this are.

First, Wachtel identifies three elements that may build a shared identity but were not used during Soviet rule. The first element is religion, which did not fit Marxist ideals as it was the "opiate of the people". The second element is a shared language. The ethnic mix in Kyrgyzstan, slightly over 50% of the population being Kyrgyz, dominance of the Russian language, and concentration of Kyrgyz in rural areas and non-Kyrgyz in cities made a shared language non-viable. The third option was a shared tradition: nomadism. It was not utilized because of ideological reasons (nomadism was suppressed) and because collectivization deprived many nomads of their land. Thus there was not enough material to build a national identity (Wachtel, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Even the Manas epic was sparsely used in Soviet times. After the Soviet Union fell, the epic was used to build an ethno-national identity. As a result, multiple Manas statues were erected in Bishkek and Osh, Bishkek's airport was renamed in his honor, and learning about Manas became a graduation requirement at universities. Nonetheless, there are issues with Manas as a national hero: he was a warlord, mostly feasting, hunting, raiding, and doing

sports. Wachtel states that there should be a connection between a national hero and the people in the nation, but this is not the case with Manas.

The author still sees a solution: the rise of Kurmanzhan Datka's importance in recent years. She lived in the 19th century and became the leader of a tribe after her husband died. She evaded Russian influence until she saw no other way and joined the Russian Empire. She became a celebrity and her sons became local officials. Kurmanzhan Datka is more pragmatic and more of a statesman than Manas, taking the edge off his strong, masculine image. The result is a more well-rounded model for national identity. Although Kurmanzhan Datka is not a national hero yet, Wachtel concludes that she and Manas are presented together as models that can be used to create a Kyrgyz national identity.

The paper gives context to the statement above that the Manas statue and flagpole on Ala Too Square are supposed to promote Kyrgyz national identity. The features of national identities these structures symbolize, a central state and culture (common language, traditions) are, with the exception of a central state, the features that were not utilized in the Soviet Union. The reasons for this can be explained using a functionalist perspective: utilizing these features would have had dysfunctional consequences that outweigh the functional ones. For example, promoting nomadism (tradition) to create a national identity would have been hypocritical and impossible if nomadism was being suppressed at the same time.

After the Soviet Union fell, some of the latent dysfunctional consequences for utilizing a common language, religion, and nomadism disappeared. Nomadism (Manas lifestyle, symbols on the flag) is now used to create a national identity as there are no dysfunctional consequences for doing so. It is no longer being suppressed and thus it is not hypocritical to utilize nomadism. Religion is not present in the monuments on Ala Too Square, but the Kyrgyz inscription on the Manas statue is the only language used, which can represent a common language (even though it is not the common language yet). The Manas statue and the flagpole are promoting a Kyrgyz national identity through culture and a central state. In the Soviet Union culture was not used for this purpose.

In conclusion, the way a Kyrgyz national identity is being created and shaped has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union as the result of dysfunctional consequences disappearing. Now a common culture, exemplified by language and traditions shown on Ala Too Square, are the focus. How this process will continue is impossible to say, but it will be

interesting to follow it. I wonder how Kurmanzhan Datka's role will develop, as Wachtel attached great importance to her role. Will her importance continue to grow as he indicates and will she reach the same status Manas now has? Additionally, the fact that the Kyrgyz language is competing with the Russian language is an issue that remains to be solved. I think it will be difficult to further shape the Kyrgyz national identity, even utilizing culture, as it is a slow and unpredictable process. Regardless of that, the process of creating a national identity is important and can have highly functional consequences, such as creating a sense of belonging and unity in the nation.

References

- Johnson, A. G. (1996). Human arrangements: An introduction to sociology. *Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.*
- Wachtel, A. (2016). A Tale of Two Heroes: Kyrgyzstan in Search of National Role Models. *Region, 5(1), 1-16*