

# Reflection Paper - Functions of Ala-Too Square's Monuments

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The picture above, from 10.11.2019, shows Ala-Too Square in the center of Bishkek. It is located close to the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic and other official buildings. I took this photo because I think Ala-Too Square is nice to look at and an interesting mix of architectural styles. The photo shows the State Flagpole and the Manas Monument in the foreground. Because only important monuments would be built in a central location like Ala-Too Square, the question is what makes the State Flagpole and the Manas Monument important. This question can be split into two parts: What are the monuments supposed to achieve? Why is it important to achieve that? To ask these questions in a sociological way, the functionalist perspective can be used. According to Johnson's *Human Arrangements: An Introduction to Sociology*, this perspective investigates how social systems operate, change, produce consequences, and how those consequences interact with the system. Manifest consequences are intended, while latent ones are unintended. Consequences are called functional if they contribute to the system and dysfunctional if they interfere with it (1996, p. 88). With this definition, the questions can be rephrased: What is the function and manifest consequence(s) of the State Flagpole and the Manas Monument? Why are those consequences important?

First, the functions of these monuments need to be clarified. Here the description by Bellentani and Panico in their paper *The Meanings of Monuments and Memorials: Toward a Semiotic Approach* will be used. They write that “Political elites use monuments to represent their dominant worldviews in space”, the monuments show selected narratives (2016, p. 29). Anything that has more meaning than itself, like a monument representing a narrative, is what Johnson calls a symbol. Symbols are essential parts of culture because they allow humans to attach meaning to experiences and things, they are necessary to make sense of the world (Johnson, 1996, p. 20). Monuments are thus symbols created by elites representing specific narratives about culture. Therefore, the function of the Manas Monument and the State Flagpole is representing the cultural narrative of the Kyrgyz political elite that wants to cause consequences that are functional for them.

The narrative of the monuments on Ala-Too Square is driven by symbolism. The Kyrgyz national flag is based on two symbols: the tunduk, centerpiece of a yurt, and 40 sunrays representing 40 Kyrgyz tribes. The meaning of these symbols goes beyond the physical things they describe, encompassing the traditions and way of life of a people. The Manas Monument depicts the mythical warrior Manas riding a horse. He is the central character in Kyrgyz oral epic poetry and his monument bears inscriptions in the Kyrgyz language. Manas symbolizes the Kyrgyz tradition of storytelling and the nomadic way of life. The inscription in the Kyrgyz language marks the statue and Manas as Kyrgyz.

This focus on being “Kyrgyz” connects oral epic poetry, nomadism, and language; they are all presented as parts of Kyrgyz culture. The resulting narrative is that these things are Kyrgyz and the basis for Kyrgyz culture. They have historically been part of the lives of Kyrgyz people and now the monuments put them into the 21st century, giving them new relevance. Thus, the political elite provides a kind of definition of what they want “Kyrgyz” or “Kyrgyz culture” to mean. The cultural symbols on the national flag, together with placing the flag next to the Manas Monument, makes clear that the state wants to link itself to its cultural narrative. This promotes the idea that the Kyrgyz Republic is a state in the tradition of its people. The function of oral epic tradition, nomadism, and language in the monuments is defining what Kyrgyz culture means and linking that culture to the Kyrgyz Republic. The consequence of this narrative is that it creates an idea of Kyrgyz culture and links it to the Kyrgyz state. This, in turn, enables Kyrgyz citizens to identify with the state through the culture.

These consequences can be assumed to be manifest, meaning they must be functional and important for the political elite. Citizens identifying with culture and then a state with that culture is functional for the existence or creation of national identity. For the Kyrgyz political elite, the forming of a Kyrgyz national identity is important because the country is currently in the process of nation creation, according to the paper *A Tale of Two Heroes: Kyrgyzstan in Search of National Role Models* by Andrew Wachtel (2016, p. 1). He argues that during the time of the Soviet Union, the creation of a Kyrgyz national identity failed because common, strong symbols of national identity were not utilized for ideological reasons. These symbols are language, religion, nomadism, and the Manas epic. After Kyrgyzstan gained independence, the political elite began the process of creating a national identity and this process is still ongoing (Wachtel, 2016). Today, all markers except religion are used to create a national identity and they are present on Ala-Too Square.

The creation of national identity is important because, as Murzakulova and Schoeberlein state in their paper *The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology*, “Ideology is held to be a key to successful state building” (2009, p. 1230). The Kyrgyz political elite has a great interest in the successful creation of national identity because state- or nation-building is heavily dependent on it. Successful state building can improve the lives of the people in the state and thus it is clear why the political elite wants the state building to be successful<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, the Manas Monument and the State Flagpole are on Ala-Too Square because they are important. Their importance stems from their function as representations of the political elite’s cultural narrative. This narrative has the functional consequence that it defines “Kyrgyz” and “Kyrgyz culture” and links it to the Kyrgyz Republic, enabling people to identify with it. This identification is functional for the creation of a national identity, which is, in turn, functional for nation-building. As the Kyrgyz Republic is currently in that process and its successful completion would be functional for the political elite, they have a great interest in creating a national identity to support that process. Because the Manas Monument and the State Flagpole contribute to the formation of national identity, they are presented on Ala-Too Square and made as important as they are.

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<sup>1</sup> From their personal perspective it also provides job security.

## References

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