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Oral Epics into the Twenty-First Century: The Case of the Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*

The end of oral epics in Central Asia has been prophesied since the nineteenth century. With growing literacy in all parts of the world, oral traditions have become marginalized, and with the ever increasing pace of technical innovations, wide segments of the population have access to all kinds of entertainment, making the voice of the oral singer redundant, it would seem. Nevertheless, we can observe a surprising vitality of oral performance and oral traditions among the Kyrgyz. This paper discusses the transmission of the Kyrgyz epic tradition to the younger generation and the reasons why the epic of Manas plays such an important role for Kyrgyz cultural identity.

Keywords
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IN 1995, FOUR YEARS AFTER REACHING INDEPENDENCE, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan celebrated "Manas 1000," the thousandth birthday of their major epic *Manas*.[1] Like the epic, which, in one version, comprises half a million verse lines, the celebrations were on a grand scale. UNESCO had declared 1995 the year of the *Manas* celebration, and Federico Mayor, UNESCO's director general at the time, delivered an address at the end of the festivities. Official delegations from a number of countries had arrived to watch the *Manas* dance-and-drama spectacle in the plain of Talas, the home of the hero, and to experience Kyrgyz hospitality in the yurts erected there. An international conference had also been organized, with papers on many aspects of the epic, and in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, the loudspeakers on public squares boomed with the sound of singers performing the epic. The first president of Kyrgyzstan, Asqar Aqayev, then still in power, gave a speech on "Manas—the Non-Fading Star of the Kyrgyz Spirit," as the English version of his speech, distributed to the members of the various delegations, was entitled. There can be little doubt that "Manas 1000" was a demonstration of Kyrgyz independence, Kyrgyz nationhood, and Kyrgyz pride in their cultural heritage.

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In view of the political and cultural significance of these celebrations, the question of whether the *Manas* epic is in fact 1,000 years old is almost of secondary importance. Scholars have linked some of the characters of the epic (in particular the hero Manas himself), as well as some of the events featuring in it, to the historical period after the defeat of the Uighurs in 840 CE. At that time, the Kyrgyz had the supremacy in Inner Asia, with the center of their power in an area extending from the shores of Lake Baikal and the upper course of the Yenisei to the Altai mountain range and its foothills. Their realm came to an end with the conquests of Genghis Khan at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Placing the origin of the epic in this historical period raises many problems and has not found acceptance with all scholars. Considering that the earliest written versions of the epic are no earlier than the middle of the nineteenth century, the epic's genesis must remain speculative. There is, however, one early "text" of a tiny fragment of the epic. It is found in a historiographical work, written in Persian, which dates to the end of the fifteenth century or the beginning of the sixteenth century. This work devotes much space to Manas, his relatives, his companions, and his foes, and it quotes six lines from the poem (in Persian translation). It is therefore probably safe to say that 1995 marked 500 years of *Manas*—if not 1,000. Saying this, however, does not exclude the possibility that the origin of the Kyrgyz epic tradition is considerably older.[2] What is surprising about the Kyrgyz epic tradition is not so much its age—whatever that may be—but its continuance into the present day, into the twenty-first century.

Manas *in the Context of Other Living Epics*

Manas is not the only oral epic still alive, of course. A look at UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage shows that the Kyrgyz tradition is only one of many.[3] In fact, more oral epic traditions are known than are listed by UNESCO. Among Indian traditions, neither the Rajasthani *Pābūjī* epic from the north nor the Tulu *Siri* epic from the southwest appears in the list. While an oral epic from Mauretania is listed, the oral art of the *griots* from Mali is absent from the list, and there is no mention of the vibrant epic tradition in the Rugova Gorge in Kosovo. Among the peoples speaking a Turkic language, the oral epic traditions of the Turks of Turkey, of the Azerbaijanians, of the Yakuts, and of the Kyrgyz are represented. The latter includes both Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan and those from Xinjiang, China, where they comprise a small minority of the population.[4] As far as the genres of oral epic and romance are concerned, however, only the Kyrgyz, among the Turkic-speaking peoples, still have a flourishing living tradition. The singers of tales have often ceded their place to musicians who have learned the art of performing traditional music and have memorized texts from published editions. In many cases, the oral performance of epic has become a stage performance.

This is a process that started early. The oral epic has been declared moribund since the nineteenth century. In 1864, the Hungarian turcologist Hermann Vámbéry brought back from his travels in Central Asia the manuscript of an Uzbek popular epic; when he later published it, he remarked in the introduction that "*terakki*, i.e. progress has become the battle-cry of all" and predicted the end of the "old Central Asian

life of the people with its wild romanticism and exceptional world-view" (Vámbéry 1911:3–4). Of course, Vámbéry was right in his assessment of what *terakki*, progress, would do to society, but despite *terakki*, oral poetry and oral epics continued to flourish right into the second half of the twentieth century. This was true also among the Uzbeks, to whom Vámbéry was referring in particular.

About 150 years later, in 2008, the Turkish folklorist İlhan Başgöz closed his book on the Turkish folk romance (called *hikâye*) with the observation that the social changes of recent years had practically eliminated the art of oral epic performance in Turkey. In his epilogue, tellingly entitled "A Sad Farewell," he writes:

> The radical social and economic changes of the last fifty years in Turkey—that is, the migration of millions of peoples from villages to cities (inside Turkey and to Europe at large), increased levels of literacy (almost universal), increased communication between high and low culture, the increased blurring of oral and written literatures, and finally, the great technical revolution in mass communication—have effectively eliminated traditional hikâye performance at the time of this writing (2007). (Başgöz 2008:214)

The picture that emerges from Başgöz's study of the Turkish *hikâye* can be painted in similar colors and with similar shapes and outlines of other Turkic oral traditions. For the Turkic-speaking peoples of the former Soviet Union, the most productive time of recording oral epics, generally by dictation rather than on tape, were the years from the end of World War II into the 1970s. In some areas, however, the writing down of oral epics began in the 1920s. We do have a few early sound-recordings, such as a 1903–1904 phonogram of the second part of the Kyrgyz *Manas* cycle, *Semetey*, as sung by the Kyrgyz bard Kenje Qara, and the 1928 recording of an extract of the Uzbek epic *Alpamysh* by the Uzbek singer Fāzil Yoldāsh-oghli.[5] Some of the great epic singers, however, had already died before the war (the Kyrgyz *manaschy* Saghymbay Orozbaqov in 1930, the Uzbek *bakhshi* Ergash Jumanbulbul-oghli in 1937). Others died in the 1950s and 1960s, among them the Kazakh singer Muryn-jyrau Senggirbaev (in 1954), the Uzbek *bakhshi* Fāzil Yoldāsh-oghli (in 1955), and the Yakut epic singer Innokentiĭ Timofeev-Teploukhov (in 1962). The Kyrgyz bard Sayaqbay Qaralaev, whose version of *Manas* is the longest on record, died in 1971. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, only a few traditional singers, that is, singers who had acquired their repertoire in the traditional way by word of mouth and who performed in the traditional style (rather than as artists on stage), were left. In 2005, the last traditional Karakalpak *jyrau*, Jumabay Bazarov, died, as did the last performer of Shor epics (in the Altai), Vladimir Yegorovich Tannagashev, in 2007. The Kyrgyz *manaschy* Jüsüp Mamay, whose justly celebrated version of *Manas* comprises about 220,000 verse lines, was alive when the present essay was completed (2013), but died in June 2014 at the age of 96.[6]

The Manas *Epic Past and Present*

The epic known loosely as "*Manas*" is actually a cycle of epics, one that runs through several generations of heroes. Only the first part, therefore, is properly called *Manas*.

The epic cycle is often referred to as the *Manas* trilogy, since it consists of three separate narratives properly called *Manas*, *Semetey* (featuring Manas's son), and *Seytek* (featuring his grandson). This is, as it were, the canonical form of the cycle. There are, however, versions in which the cycle comprises further generations. The fullest version, which was recorded from Jüsüp Mamay, continues into the eighth generation with the additional epics *Keninim*, *Seyt*, *Asylbacha and Bekbacha*, *Sombilek*, and *Chigitey*. The version of the cycle produced by Sayaqbay Qaralaev (1894–1971) included (in its over 500,000 lines) the main triad as well as narratives on Seytek's sons. From Saghymbay Orozbaqov (1867–1930), only the first part, *Manas*, was written down (comprising over 180,000 lines). The earliest text from the *Manas* cycle, "The Funeral Feast for Kökötöy Khan," was put down in writing by the Kazakh traveler and ethnographer Chokan Valikhanov in 1856. This epic, comprising ca. 3,200 verse-lines, describes the feast that Boqmorun, the son of Manas's old companion Kökötöy, held in memory of his dead father.[7] Valikhanov wrote in his "Notes about the Kyrgyz":

> There can be no doubt that the main and perhaps the only creation in verse form of the popular genius of the Kyrgyz[8] is the saga about Manas. *Manas* is an encyclopedia, a collection of all tales, narratives, legends, of geographical, religious, intellectual knowledge, and ethical ideas of the people into one whole, projected into one time, with all this grouped around one personage, the hero Manas. *Manas* is the creation of the whole people, who have grown a fruit that ripened in the course of many years; it is a folk epos, a kind of *Iliad* of the steppe. (Valikhanov 1985:70)

Valikhanov's characterization of *Manas* as "a kind of *Iliad* of the steppe" is most appropriate. *Manas* has the breadth of vision as well as the high poetic style of an *epos* in the Homeric sense. *Manas* expresses the Kyrgyz's view of their roots in history and affirms their cultural and ethnic identity in the form of traditional poetry. Its length forbids a summary of its contents, but some indication of its plot will be helpful as background to the ensuing discussion.[9]

Like many other heroes in Turkic epics and folktales, Manas is the son of a couple who have remained childless for a long time. In old age, Jaqyp and his wife, Chyyyrdy, finally have a son, who receives the name "Manas" at his name-giving feast. In Radloff's version, four prophets predict a bright future for the hero at that occasion. Manas fulfills the prophecies uttered at his birth: He successfully fights against his enemies, both within and without his tribe. On his exploits, Manas is accompanied by his 40 companions, but he also shares many of his adventures with his Kalmuck friend Almambet. Almambet was converted to Islam and, at first, hospitably received by the Kazakh khan Kökchö. Later, Almambet has a quarrel with Kökchö and leaves him to seek out Manas. Almambet and Manas seal their friendship by drinking the milk that miraculously spouts from Chyyyrdy's breasts on seeing Almambet. In the further course of Radloff's version, Manas is twice poisoned, but each time brought back to life. In the end, even a mighty hero like Manas has to die: he finds his death from the hand of Qongurbay, his Chinese archenemy, but not without leaving a descendant behind, his valiant son, Semetey. This is only the barest of outlines of the life and deeds of the Kyrgyz hero Manas. Episodes like his taking a bride—the beautiful Qanykey, daughter of Temir Khan—or his expedition to Beijin to fight against the Chinese

under Qongurbay (*Chong qazat*, "The Great Campaign") are lengthy and intricate epics on their own. In Saghymbay's version, for instance, the bride-wooing part of *Manas* alone comprises about 4,000 verse-lines and the "Great Campaign" almost 15,000 lines.[10] All in all, over 2 million lines from the *Manas* cycle are said to have been written down in Kyrgyzstan.

Where oral epics of such proportions flourish, there must be talented singers and oral poets and a cultural milieu in which a high premium is placed on verbal art. In the mid-nineteenth century, Radloff, the collector of Kyrgyz oral poetry, found the fluency and rhetorical skills of the Kyrgyz remarkable:

> The Kyrgyz master their language in an astonishing way; they always speak fluently, without stopping or halting, and combine in their speech clarity and precision of expression with a certain elegance. Even common speech shows a clear rhythm in the building of clauses and sentences, so that individual sentences are strung together like verse lines and stanzas and give almost the impression of poetry. One can tell that a Kyrgyz orator loves to speak and impress his listeners by a gracefully phrased well-considered speech. One can also see everywhere how an audience enjoys a well-delivered speech and knows how to judge whether a speech is perfect in form. The narrator is surrounded by deep silence if he knows how to fascinate his listeners. These sit and listen to the words of the speaker with the upper part of their body leaning forward and their eyes shining; every skilful word, every sparkling pun elicits lively applause.[11]

While the language and melodious speech of the Kyrgyz has not changed significantly since Radloff's days, the occasions for enjoying verbal art have greatly changed and are not confined to live performances in a yurt. Kyrgyz as a written standard language was only created in 1924. It was at first written in Arabic letters, but, in 1928, the Arabic alphabet was superseded by the Latin alphabet and, in 1941, by the Cyrillic alphabet. Today, after independence, the Kyrgyz continue to use the Cyrillic script. The Kyrgyz in Xinjiang, on the other hand, write their language with Arabic letters. Illiteracy is less than 1 percent in Kyrgyzstan and less than 2 percent in Xinjiang. In many cases, the listening audience is replaced (or at least augmented) by readers. The epic of Manas can be read in many forms: as comic, as a prose tale for adult Kyrgyz readers, as a tale retold for children (in both Russian and Kyrgyz), as a verse epic adapted for a wider readership, as well as in scholarly editions of oral versions, such as those of Sayaqbay, Saghymbay, and Jüsüp Mamay.[12]

In addition to its printed forms, the epic has also been used for libretti and film scripts. The Kyrgyz State Theatre was founded in the city of Frunze (now named Bishkek) in 1937, and transformed into the Kyrgyz State Theatre of Opera and Ballet in 1942. In 1939, the opera *Aychürök*, based on episodes from the second part of the *Manas* cycle, *Semetey*, and composed by Vladimir Vlasov, Abdylas Maldybaev, and Vladimir Fere, had its premiere. In 1946, the opera *Manas* followed, written by the same composers (see Alagushev 1995:41–59). There are several films based on *Manas* and the singers of the epic. Sayaqbay Qaralaev figures in two documentaries, the film *Manaschy* by Bolot Shamshiev of 1965 and the film *Uluu Manaschy* (The Great Singer of *Manas*) by Melis Ubukeev. The first is in Russian, the second in

Kyrgyz, with the well-known Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov as commentator. Of particular interest in the present context is a third film, *Rozhdenie Manasa kak predchuvstvie* (The Birth of Manas as a Presentiment), directed by Nurbek Egen, which was released in 2010. It, too, is a documentary, one that focuses on the careers and views of eight Kyrgyz contemporaries. Among them are a *manaschy* and a *qomuz*-player,[13] a border policeman, a businessman, a young woman working as a migrant worker in a bar in Moscow, and a professor of sociology teaching in Japan. The film reflects on a society in a period of transition, when the need to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century threatens old values and radically upsets traditional forms of life.[14] The film argues persuasively that the forces of tradition are still at work and have, in some cases, been newly discovered, providing a point of reference for both departure and return. The film is not about the substance of the Manas story, but the epic is frequently mentioned as a storehouse of Kyrgyz tradition. In the words of the director, "the film will be especially interesting for young people, for historians, and for those who think about our country and its fate."[15]

What a film like that of Nurbek Egen shows is the deep concern of post-Soviet Kyrgyz society with the value of tradition in the modern world. Every protagonist in the film is introduced by a quotation from *Manas*. Also mentioned is his or her clan and tribe affiliation with reference to the tribal *tamgha*, the rune-like emblem that is still today used as a cattle brand. The epic of *Manas* acts as a prism through which Kyrgyz identity is viewed. This central position of the epic in the self-understanding of the Kyrgyz people is also supported by the Kyrgyz political system. After the "Manas 1000" celebrations of 1995, the state board responsible for the preparation and organization of the festival was, by presidential decree, transformed into the "State Board on Publicizing the Epic *Manas*." The decree, which was also published in English, included a five-year plan extending from 1996 to 2000 with a wide spectrum of activities. Two of its educational measures are worth mentioning. One of these, "with a view to the patriotic upbringing of children and schoolchildren in the spirit of [the] epos *Manas*," provides for increasing the number of hours for the study of *Manas* in the Kyrgyz-language schools, while the other mandates "introduction in Russian-language schools [of] the study of [the] epos *Manas*." Although this state board is no longer in existence, the importance accorded to *Manas* in the highest political circles continues, as is testified by the fact that the official website of the president of the Kyrgyz Republic has under the heading "Kyrgyzstan" a special section on *Manas*.[16]

While various efforts are made to propagate the knowledge of *Manas* as the central cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people in Kyrgyzstan, projects to document, record, and support the performance of singers have also been undertaken. I would like to briefly present two of these initiatives.

The first is a UNESCO-sponsored project entitled "The art of the *akyns* [*aqyns*], the Kyrgyz epic tellers." The project was originally proclaimed in 2003, and, in 2008, it was inscribed on UNESCO's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."[17] While the word *aqyn* is the general word for poet in Kyrgyz, it is also used for the folksinger who, as a rule, accompanies him or herself on the *qomuz* and performs songs of his or her own composition, as well as what the Kyrgyz call "small epics," that is, oral epics that do not belong to the *Manas* cycle.[18] In the original application

to UNESCO, two lists were provided, one of "*aqyns*-singers of *Manas* (*manaschys*)" and one of "*aqyns*-singers of 'small' epics and *aqyns*-improvisers (*tökmö-aqyns*)." The organizer of this project, Beksultan Jakiev, a well-known Kyrgyz writer and stage director, listed 16 manaschys and 13 *aqyns* by name.[19] The oldest of the manaschys in the list was born in 1917, the youngest in 1979. Eight manaschys, born between 1917 and 1947, were still alive at the beginning of the twenty-first century, according to Jakiev's information. The youngest in this group, Asanqan Jumaliev, who was born in 1947, is still alive (in 2013); the second youngest, the famous singer Urkash Mambetaliev, who was born in 1934, died in 2011. The eight younger manaschys in Jakiev's list were born between 1951 and 1979. Jakiev adds to the list of manaschys the remark: "In addition, more than forty young epic tellers are pupils of schools and students of higher educational institutions." In the second list, 13 *aqyns*, born between 1927 and 1966, are mentioned by name. Among the manaschys, two women singers are named: Seydene Moldoke-qyzy (1922–2006) and Ayzada Subaqojoyeva (born in 1979); among the group of *aqyns*, there is one woman singer in Jakiev's list, Mayra Kerim-qyzy (1962–2009). Of these, Seydene Moldoke-qyzy is the best known; she was a *semeteychi*, that is, a singer of the second part of the *Manas* cycle, the epic *Semetey*.[20] With the support of the National Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic for UNESCO, Jakiev organized a conference in October 2007 on the topic "Epic Heritage and Its Safeguarding" in Bishkek. About 20 papers were given, and Mr. Jakiev distributed a shortened version of *Manas* that he had synthesized from various versions (Jakiev 2007).

The second initiative to document and support singers is the Aigine project. This is run by the Aigine Cultural Research Center, which characterizes itself as a non-profit, non-governmental organization founded in May 2004 at the initiative of Gulnara Aitpaeva.[21] According to the Center's website, it "carries out its activities in the field of traditional knowledge, education, humanities and social research. . . . These project activities are directed at preserving, developing and integrating traditional wisdom with contemporary life and aiming to incorporate the positive potential of traditional wisdom in decision-making at all levels of public and political life."

The Manas branch of these projects consisted in its first stage in the video-recording of 50 episodes from the first part of the epic as performed by different singers. The description of this recording project on the Aigine website includes the following statement of purpose:

> The goal of the project is to compile full video recordings and form [a] complete traditional version of the *Manas* epic narrated by contemporary *manaschys*. . . . All video recording sessions took place in different places throughout the country[,] including places of historical significance mentioned in the epic and places of communion where *manaschys* receive inspiration and spiritual elevation. All these places were in the lap of nature with snow-capped mountains, turbulent rivers, crystal clear lake[s] and diversity of beautiful wild flowers, which in turn perfectly reflect the essence, power, and the free spirit of the *Manas* epic. . . . The video version of the epic is being distributed to all the educational institutions throughout the country free of charge.

The videos can be watched on (and downloaded from) the Center's website. In 2013, 39 episodes from *Semetey* and 35 episodes from *Seytek* have been uploaded; the recording

time of the trilogy is over 50 hours. Fifteen manaschys participated in the project, some of whom sang only one episode, while others sang up to over 20 episodes.

The Singers and Their Calling

How did these manaschys learn the poems they perform, whether they sing them at singers' contests, for projects like the Aigine project, to scholars interested in the epic heritage of the Kyrgyz, or to the public at appropriate occasions?

In November 2013, at a conference in Bishkek on the so-called "First Kyrgyz Khanate,"[22] I asked Talantaaly Baqchiev, who gave a paper on "The Epic *Manas* and Socialist Ideology," whether he had learned the epic from published texts. His answer was no, and he added: "If I had learned the epic by memorizing a text, I could perform for only 15 or 20 minutes at the most." So how did he learn the epic?

Like other manaschys, Talantaaly Baqchiev had a dream in which he was encouraged to recite the epic. In fact, he had several dreams. In his first dream, when he was still a boy, Qanykey, Manas's wife, appeared to him.[23] These dreams and visions are a standard explanation that Kyrgyz singers give when asked why and how they became manaschys (or *semeteychis*). Raisa Qydyrbaeva has published several of these dreams (in Russian translation) from manuscript sources. As an example, here is the dream that the famous singer Saghymbay Orozbaqov is reported to have had:

> When Saghymbay with his brother Alisher moved from Issyk Kul to Qochqor, his whole family became ill with smallpox. In his fever Saghymbay was either delirious or dreamt the following: He seemed to be walking on the plain of Qochqor and saw that enormous yurts, big as mountains, were put up there. Next to the yurts unusually big horses were tethered, with their ears erect and their hooves as big as huge bowls. At the yurts' doors, armor and weapons were laid down in a heap. In amazement, Saghymbay did not understand a thing and decided to enter one of the yurts. The yurt was full of people, and these people were also unusually big. They invited Saghymbay to sit down in the seat of honor, while one of them was telling some interesting stories and they all laughed. It turned out that this was Ajybay [one of Manas's 40 companions]. One of them said: "This youngster will tell the epic." They asked Saghymbay to begin the recital. Saghymbay answered that he did not know the tale. At this point, a *jigit* [young man] entered the yurt, wearing a coat of camel's hair and a huge cap and with a battle-axe in his hands. He began to menace Saghymbay: "He is to be cut to pieces, unless he finally begins to recite!" Then the person who had been telling interesting stories said to Saghymbay: "My son, you are still fairly young. Don't refuse, but tell him that you can do it, or he might accidentally finish you off." Saghymbay was forced to answer that he knew the tale. When he looked around, he saw that singer-narrators were sitting and reciting the epic in different corners of the yurt: one was telling about Manas's birth, another about Közqaman and his sons,[24] a third about the Great Campaign. When Saghymbay had three times answered the question that was posed to him three times, saying that he would recite, all those who were sitting there took their equipment and left the yurt. Suddenly it became lighter in the yurt; it began to dawn, and in the dawn light, Saghymbay clearly saw the people leaving. At this moment he regained consciousness and cried out to his family:

> "Did you see the people who left the yurt?" All the sick in Saghymbay's household began to feel better. The person who had menaced Saghymbay with the battle-axe was apparently Semetey.
>
> In this way, the *manaschy* talked about his dream.[25]

Dreams such as this are cited as evidence for their calling by singers from other Turkic oral traditions as well, and the dream motif is widely distributed in Turkish folk romances or *hikâye*. İlhan Başgöz has interpreted this motif as a survival from pre-Islamic shamanism, an interpretation that has also been proposed for other Turkic traditions.[26] These dreams and visions are, however, not a unique phenomenon of Turkic epic singers and oral poets. Already in the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet Hesiod describes in his *Theogony* that, one day when he was shepherding his lambs, the Muses "breathed into him a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime" (Evelyn-White 1914:81). Medieval examples can be cited, too, for instance, the dream of the Anglo-Saxon illiterate farmhand Cædmon, who received his poetic gift by divine inspiration in a dream. Then there is the Norse skald Hallbjörn, who fell asleep at the grave of the skald Thorleif while trying to compose a poem in his praise; Thorleif came out of his grave and taught Hallbjörn a praise poem while he was asleep.[27] What these initiation dreams and visions underline is that the gift of being a poet (or a traditional singer) is indeed a gift, an unusual talent that demands a wholehearted devotion if it is to flourish.

The Training of Singers

Although, in some of these accounts, the impression is given that when the dreamer wakes, he is in perfect possession of the singer's or poet's skills, there can be no doubt that Kyrgyz manaschys have to go through a process of training before they are able to perform the epic freely. Kengesh Qyrbashev states that Saghymbay began to perform the epic of *Manas* at the age of 15 or 16 years, and he elaborates as follows on some of Saghymbay's teachers:

> As with all *manaschys*, Saghymbay's performance of *Manas* is connected to his having had a dream. However, other singers had a strong influence on Saghymbay's performance style as a *manasch*y, including Balyq, Naymanbay, Tynybek, Aqylbek, and Dyyqanbay. Saghymbay had heard *Manas* in its entirety for the first time from the mouth of Tynybek. Of the great *manaschys* of this time he saw Balyq; he heard him when he was still young. Saghymbay's older brother Alisher, too, was a well-known *manaschy*. It is to be expected that Saghymbay heard *Manas* at first from his brother Alisher. Q. Rakhmatullin, however, wrote: "According to what the *manaschy* Shapaq had said, when Saghymbay heard Chongbash (Narmantay) for the first time, who was the teacher of the *manaschy* old Tynybek, he got so excited that he went to stay with Chongbash to learn *Manas*."[28]

What does it mean for an apprentice manaschy to learn the epic? Radloff, in the introduction to his edition and translation of *Manas* and other Kyrgyz oral poetry, stated that the Kyrgyz epic singer, on the one hand, "improvises" at every performance,

but, on the other hand, also has what Radloff called ready-made narrative motifs ("*Vortragstheile*" or "*Bildtheilchen*") in store for his recital:

> Every singer with some ability always improvises his songs according to the inspiration of the moment, so that he is incapable of reciting his poem twice in an absolutely identical manner. One should not believe, however, that this improvising means a new process of composition every time. . . . Because of his extensive experience in performing he has, if I may say so, a number of narrative units (*Vortragstheile*) at his disposal, ones that he puts together in a manner appropriate to the course of the narrative.[29]

What Radloff is describing here accords with later research on South Slavic epic singers by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and is termed "composition in performance" by the proponents of the oral-formulaic theory.[30]

A closer look at the Kyrgyz epics and the variants recorded, however, reveals some significant differences from the South Slavic model. Although formulaic lines can be found, they are less frequent than in the material that Parry and Lord analyzed. This is partly due to the meter and partly due to the style of Kyrgyz epic poetry. The meter of Kyrgyz epic (and folk poetry in general) is syllabic; the metrical line of *Manas* (and other Kyrgyz epics) is a seven-syllable line.[31] Lines are linked into irregular groups (similar to the *laisses* of the Old French *chansons de geste*) by vertical (line-initial) alliteration and by rhyme. These two ways of linking lines are independently used; neither is entirely regular. Many lines have no alliteration or rhyme. An example will make this relatively free manner of composition clear:

Ulamadan ulasaq,
Uluulardan surasaq,
Murunqu ötkön chaqtarda,
Batysh, tündük jaqtarda,
Enesay degen jer bolghon,
Jeri sonun keng bolghon,
Özönü toqoy cher bolghon,
Törlörü tulang kür bolghon,
Egin ekse mol bolghon,
Az aydasa köp bolghon,
Oroonun baary jyq tolghon,
Azyp-tozup barghandar,
Bayyr alyp toqtolghon,
Bay-jardysy bilgisiz,
Baarynyn qardy toq bolghon,
Enesay elin bashqarghan,
Qal Mamay degen qan bolghon.[32]

(If we listen to the wise,
If we inquire from the old,
We hear that in the days long past,
In regions lying north and west,
There was a place called Yenisei.[33]
This land was marvelously wide,

Its rivers lined by woods and groves,
Its pastures verdant, meadows lush,
All crops yielded abundant grain,
With little plowing harvest rich:
The granaries full to the brim.
The people wandered here and there,
They settled down, found their abode;
Rich and poor, without distinction,
Had food enough to eat their fill.
The Yeniseians had a ruler,
A khan by the name of Qal Mamay.)[34]

When we look at this passage, we can see that only certain lines have vertical alliteration (lines 133–134, 145–147), while, with few exceptions (such as lines 144, 146, and 148), all lines rhyme. The rhyme consists in most cases of the form *bolghon*, meaning "was," rhyming in two instances with *tolghon*, both as a free form ("was full") and as a suffix (in *toqtolghon*, from *toqtol-* "to stay"). *Bolghon* (and *tolghon*) are preceded by a one-syllable word (or in the case of *toqtolghon* by a one-syllable bound morpheme). This means that the actual "rhyme" is as follows:

jer bolghon : *keng bolghon* : *cher bolghon* : *kür bolghon* : *mol bolghon* : *köp bolghon* : *jyr tolghon* : *toqtolghon* : *toq bolghon* : *qan bolghon*.[35]

Rhymes like these are common in *Manas*. They can be spun out at great lengths, thus demonstrating the skill of the singer.

Another type of rhyme is based on verb-forms where both derivational and inflectional morphemes rhyme (or have assonance); sometimes these verbs are onomatopoetic verbs. I will give a short example, again from Jüsüp Mamay's *Manas*, using italic font to point out the rhyming elements:

Qytyghyyy *qytyldap*,
Tili kekech boluuchu,
Kep aytalbay *qyqyldap*.
Astalay basyp Chongjindi,
Kelip qaldy *chuquldap*.
"Erligin munun körsöm"—dep,
Jamghyrchy turat *multuldap*,
Tonuna batyp toqtoboy,
Alp Jamghyrchy *qutuldap*.[36]

(Qytyghyy then started *mumbling*,
He had a stutter in his speech,
He could not say a word and *stammered*.
Chongjindi [= Manas], softly and slowly walking,
Came and *approached* him.
"I want to see his bravery,"
Thought Jamghyrchy and *thrust his body forward*,
Wrapped round his coat:
Brave Jamghyrchy *swayed, wrapped in joy*.)

The verbs that are linked by rhyme or assonance are all built on the same model: the gerund ending *-p*, the derivational suffix *-da-* (marking the word as a verb), the morpheme *-ul-* (expressive of sound or movement, i.e., basically onomatopoetic) and the verb root. As Kyrgyz has vowel harmony, the root vowel colors the vowels of the following morphemes, thus stressing the similarity of the sound pattern.

When we compare these short passages to the rest of the 54,440 lines of Jüsüp Mamay's first part of the *Manas* cycle, we notice, to our surprise, that in the first passage, only the first line can be considered formulaic. It occurs seven more times (with variations) in the epic. The third line of the first passage occurs only three more times in the epic (with variations). None of the other lines can be considered formulaic in the sense of the oral-formulaic theory. Interestingly, the rhymes *jer bolghon* (etc.) that I have just singled out for attention do not occur elsewhere in this same form and sequence. As for the second passage I have quoted, the rhyme words are, with one exception, rare in Kyrgyz. In the first part of Jüsüp Mamay's version of *Manas*, we find the following occurrences:[37]

qytylda-: -
qyqylda-: + 1x (in the immediately following line, l. 4928)
chuqulda-: + 14x
multulda-: + 1x
qultulda-: + 1x

In a Google word search on the Internet, only the verb *chuqulda-* was found. Of the nine lines of the passage, only one can be considered formulaic, namely line 4922, *Astalay basyp Chongjindi*, "slowly walking Chongjindi." Compare the following lines from other parts of this version of the epic:

7562 + 26,349	*Astalay basyp barghany*, "slowly walking he walked"
10,133	*Astalay basyp Altyke*, "slowly walking Altyke"
53,166	*Astalay basyp alyptyr*, "slowly walking he took"

Although some versions of *Manas* are more formulaic than others, Kyrgyz epics in general do not show the kind of formulaic density that is familiar from the analyses of Lord and Parry. There is, however, an element of stability in the transmission of *Manas* when it comes to typical scenes or motifs. Here, Radloff's observation about *Vortragstheile*, or more-or-less ready-made narrative units, is fully justified. I first came across such a passage in my own fieldwork in 1985, when I recorded an extract from *Semetey* in a Kyrgyz village in the Chinese Pamirs from a singer by the name of Abdurahman Düney. On close analysis, the extract I recorded showed great similarity to other versions of *Semetey* with regard to a scene in which Semetey hits his wife with his whip when she tries to stop him from riding out. A comparison of the version I recorded in 1985 with three other versions—Jüsüp Mamay's version, Sayaqbay Qaralaev's version, and the composite version of the *Manas* cycle edited by Bolot Yunusaliev—showed close correspondences both in the description of the whip and in the sequence of motifs (the swinging of the whip, the ripping of the woman's

blouse, the blood trickling down her body). Certain words are identical in the various versions, including some of the rhyme-words in the passage describing the whip. As in the second passage quoted above, these words consist of multi-suffix verb forms. The description of the whip is also found in similar terms outside this scene, as, for instance, in *The Funeral Feast for Kökötöy-Khan*.[38]

Simplifying the issue, one can say that the prerequisites for a successful manaschy consist in a good memory and in having fully absorbed the meter and poetic idiom of the epic. He or she must be familiar with the plot and its building blocks, that is, the various scenes, of which many are typical scenes that are characterized by "memorable words" (such as the verb forms in rhyme-position discussed above). Despite the traditionality of style, expression, and composition, the master-singers put their own creative stamp on their versions of the epic. Placing the original home of the Kyrgyz in the region of the upper Yenisei, for instance, as in the passage quoted above, is typical of Jüsüp Mamay's version of the epic. This detail is not found in Saghymbay Orozbaqov's version of *Manas* or in Sayaqbay Qaralaev's.

Conclusion: The Evolving Tradition

There can be no doubt that the art of the manaschy is based on talent and hard work. What their stories about their inspirational dreams tell us is not that the singers acquire their art by supernatural means, nor that they wake up from their dreams as masters of the word, but that they feel strongly impelled to become singers, to be chosen and to be called, sometimes, it seems, even against their inclinations. Like all calls, whether of a religious or secular nature, the call to become a manaschy radically determines the life of an individual. Energy, time, endurance, enthusiasm, and devotion are demanded. There is a spiritual dimension to the performance of *Manas*, one that many Kyrgyz perceive.

In recent years, in one particular case, the emphasis on divine inspiration has led to a heated debate in Kyrgyzstan. A 10-volume work with the title *Ayköl Manas* (Glorious Manas), published in 2009, is presented as based on revelations to the author of this book, Bübü Mariyam Musa-qyzy; she received these revelations (initially in 1995) from the alleged "original author" of the *Manas* epic, Jaysang Ümöt-uluu, while meditating in the Jumgha-Ata graveyard near her home village of Chayek. This book has aroused a public outcry, with strong opposition expressed by historians, folklorists, *Manas* scholars, literati, and journalists. The work is a mixture of poems (in untraditional 11- or 12-syllable rhymed couplets) and personal notes ("meditations"), and it contains such surprising elements as the incorporation of Greek mythology into the action. In 2013, a collection of 52 articles by opponents of Bübü Mariyam Musa-qyzy's revelations has come out, entitled "The Great *Manas* and Its Falsifiers."[39] Although anybody who has studied the matter will remain unconvinced that *Ayköl Manas* is what it claims to be, the fact that a 10-volume book of this kind could not only be written, but also read (and violently opposed), is evidence of the vitality of the *Manas* epic in present-day Kyrgyzstan.

Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is a modern state, despite a strong traditional strand in its society and cultural life. It is part of our globalized world; it is scarcely a society that

holds on to unbroken traditions. The country's population, especially its younger members, find the same things desirable as do people in more industrialized and less traditional countries. Nurbek Egen's film *Rozhdenie Manasa kak predchuvstvie* (The Birth of Manas as a Presentiment) shows interviews with ordinary people who somewhat shamefacedly admit that they don't really know anything about Manas. And yet there is also the video, uploaded on YouTube, of a 5-year-old boy who performs *Manas* at the eightieth anniversary of Kyrgyz Radio in 2011.[40] Clearly, the tradition continues, and it is visibly appreciated by the audience. When one talks to older scholars who have known great manaschys like Sayaqbay Qaralaev, they express their belief that the oral tradition has come to an end and that the present-day younger manaschys are no more than an afterglow of a dying tradition.[41] This might be so; but if it is an afterglow, it is impressively bright.

Notes

1. After 1991, what used to be called "Kirgiz" or "Kirghiz" was officially changed to "Kyrgyz" in the new republic, now called Kyrgyzstan. This accords with the pronunciation of the word in the native language. In this article, I am adopting the now-standard forms "Kyrgyz" and "Kyrgyzstan." For the transliteration of Russian, I am using the anglicized system as used by the Library of Congress with the exception of writing "ts," "yu," "ya," and "ė" for ц, ю, я, and э, respectively. In present-day Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz is written in Cyrillic letters that make no distinction between the velar "k" that is articulated at the back of the palate and the palatal "k" articulated at the front of the palate. For the former, in Turkic studies, "q" is used; for the latter, "k." Similarly, in Kyrgyz, the Cyrillic letter "g" (г) represents "g" as in English *gate* in the vicinity of front vowels, but, in the vicinity of back vowels, it represents a velar fricative, symbolized by "gh" (resembling the Parisian "r"). Hence, "Kyrgyz" would normally be transliterated as "Qyrghyz." In the present article, the distinctions between "k" and "q" and "g" and "gh" are expressed, with the exception of the conventional spellings "Kyrgyz" and "Kyrgyzstan." Kyrgyz personal names are transliterated according to their Kyrgyz pronunciation. In the list of References Cited, the Russian transliteration is also given if it diverges from the Kyrgyz. In personal names, the Russian suffixes *-ov* and *-ova* correspond to the Kyrgyz *uluu* (son) and *qyzy* (daughter). In Kyrgyz publications, the latter are nowadays preferred, but, in Russian publications, the former are more common. Kyrgyz has a number of sounds not found in Russian: "ö" as in the French *pneu* or German *röten* and "ü" as in the French *pur* or German *müde*. In the Romanization of Kyrgyz, "j" is pronounced as in the English *jet*. The letter "y" after or in front of a vowel symbolizes the semi-vowel "y," as in the English *yet* or *way*; after or in front of consonants, it symbolizes an unrounded "i" (as in *Kyrgyz*); in a succession of three "y's," as in the name Chyyyrdy, the first and third "y" are unrounded "i's," the second, the semi-vowel "y." The same system is used for the transliteration of other Turkic languages. In Uzbek, "ā" symbolizes long velar "a," as in the English *tall*.

2. The lines from *Manas* in Persian translation are found in the *Majmu' at-tawarikh* (Collection of Histories); see Tagidzhanov (1960:22). Basic for *Manas* studies is still V. M. Zhirmunskiĭ's "Introduction to the Study of *Manas*" (1961; in Russian); this was originally published in a volume of articles on *Manas* by a number of scholars, among whom the Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov offers a perceptive analysis of the epic (Auezov 1961). For the "Manas 1000" festival, some basic articles, among them Zhirmunskiĭ's, were republished in Russian and in English translation (the latter often fairly garbled); cf. Aliev, Sarypbekov, and Matiev (1995). An excellent tool for *Manas* studies is the two-volume Manas *Encyclopedia* (in Kyrgyz) (Abdyldaev et al. 1995). Important contributions to *Manas* studies by Raisa Qydyrbaeva are collected in Qydyrbaeva (1996; in Russian). On *Manas* and history, see Moldobaev (1995). In a new multi-volumed history of Kyrgyz literature (in Kyrgyz), the second volume is devoted to *Manas* and important manaschys; see Aqmataliev et al. (2004).

3. The updated list is found on UNESCO's website.

4. While the population of Kyrgyzstan is about 5 million (with 65 percent of the population being Kyrgyz), the Kyrgyz minority in Xinjiang comprises only approximately 190,000 people.

5. See Prior (2006) for Kenje Qara; the Uzbek recording is in the Phonogram Archive of the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. I am grateful to Professor Daniel Prior (Miami University, Ohio) for providing me with a copy of this recording.

6. On the terms for traditional epic singer-narrators found among the Turkic peoples (*manaschy*, *bakhshi*, *jyrau*), see Reichl (1992:62–87); on Jüsüp Mamay, see Lang Ying (2001).

7. Edited and translated in Hatto (1977).

8. Russian *dikokammenyĭ kirgiz*, literally "wild mountain Kyrgyz," as distinct from the Kazakh, who, at the time, were also called Kyrgyz by Russian writers.

9. The various versions differ from one another; for an English translation of the version written down by Radloff, see Hatto (1990). For a retelling (in English prose) of some episodes of *Manas* and *Semetey* in the version of Saparbek Qasmambetov, see Howard and Kasmambetov (2011).

10. For a bilingual (Kyrgyz–Russian) edition of Saghymbay's version, see Mirbadaleva et al. (1984–1995). The Russian literal translation in this edition is the basis of the translation of Saghymbay's version into English (in rhymed couplets) made by Walter May, a native speaker of English with no knowledge of Kyrgyz. The beginning of the "Great Campaign" might illustrate the quality of this rendering: "Këkëtëi's death feast passed off thus. / Most distinguished was grey-maned Manas. / Chief of the feast was old Koshoi, / All the folk were in his employ. / Bogatyr Manas, no doubt, / All those present ordered about— / Whether 'twere heathens, or Mussulmen, / All the same he swore at them" (May 1999:8). See also van der Heide (2008:210–2).

11. Radloff (1885:iii) (the translation volume; my translation).

12. The various types and examples of popularization would deserve a separate treatment. I will only mention the widely read retelling of the epic for children composed in Russian by Semën Lipkin (1947); the four-volume condensed version, edited by B. Yunusaliev (1958–1960); and the "synthetic" version of *Manas*, garnered from various singers, put together by B. Jakiev (2007) in an attempt to make the epic readily accessible.

13. The manaschy is a young man by the name of Yrysbay Rakhman-uulu; the *qomuz*-player is the well-known musician Nuraq Abdyrakhman-uulu. The *qomuz* is a three-stringed plucked lute-type instrument.

14. As quoted in http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=2326823 (accessed October 9, 2013); my translation.

15. Asanqanov and Qojoev (1997:19).

16. See http://www.president.kg/kg/manas_eposu/ (accessed October 10, 2013). On the use of *Manas* in Kyrgyz politics, see also van der Heide (2008:225–90).

17. See http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00065 (accessed October 11, 2013); safeguarding project February 2005 to October 2009. See also Asanqanov and Bekmukhamedova (1999:119–23; in the English part of the book).

18. On the term *aqyn*, also used in Kazakh, see Reichl (2013); on the *aqyn*'s singing styles, see Dyushaliev (1993:211–33).

19. These figures are based on the draft of Jakiev's application (personal communication, 2001).

20. On Seidene Moldoke-qyzy, see Abdyldaev et al. (1995:II:192–4).

21. http://www.aigine.kg/?page_id=2572&lang=en (accessed November 9, 2015). All further quotations are from this website, with slight emendations in square brackets.

22. The "First Kyrgyz Khanate" refers to the period of Kyrgyz hegemony in Central Asia, beginning in AD 840; see Butanaev and Khudyakov (2000).

23. Personal communication. More on Talantaaly Baqchiev's dreams is reported in van der Heide (2008:119–20).

24. Közqaman is Manas's paternal uncle, who had five sons, one of whom treacherously poisoned Manas, according to Radloff's version of *Manas*; see Hatto (1990:227–303).

25. Qydyrbaeva (1996:388–9; my translation); from a manuscript (inventory no. 494) in the Manuscript Archives of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences.

26. See Başgöz (1967); Reichl (1992:57–62).

27. Some of these examples, with emphasis on the Turkic traditions, are discussed in Zhirmunskiĭ (1979); for an interpretation of the Cædmon story (transmitted by the Venerable Bede) as that of a traditional singer's calling, see Magoun (1955); for text and translation of the story of Hallbjörn (in *Þórleifs þáttr Jarlsskáld*), see Kelchner (1935:129); for a discussion of this story and other Old Norse vocation stories in the context of shamanism, see Tolley (2009:I:423–7).

28. Abdyldaev et al. (1995:II:165–72, at 165, 167; my translation).

29. Radloff (1885:xvi; translation volume, my translation).

30. See the classic account by Lord (1960, esp. chaps. 3 and 4), as well as Foley (1988); for an update, see Foley and Ramey (2012).

31. This does not mean that the line comprises always seven syllables; eight syllables are quite common, but longer (and shorter) lines also occur. For more details, see Prior (2006:96–100).

32. Quoted from Jüsüp Mamay's version of *Manas*; Mamay (2004:I:3; my translation).

33. The singer understands Yenisei to be not only a river, but also a country, the original home of the Kyrgyz.

34. Kyrgyz *qal*: "birthmark, mole."

35. Literally 'was a place' : 'was broad' : 'was a dense forest' : 'was rich (pasture)' : 'was abundant' : 'was much' : 'was filled to the brim' : 'stayed' : 'was full' : 'was khan.'

36. Mamay (2004:I:47; my translation).

37. Here, the "x" indicates the number of occurrences: "14x" means "plus fourteen times," and so on.

38. For a comparative analysis, see Reichl (1992:223–35); for additional textual material, see Reichl (1995).

39. Alakhan and Abakirov (2013). Among the contributors are such well-known scholars as R. Qydyrbaeva (Kydyrbaeva), A. Aqmataliev (Akmataliev), and T. Chorotegin, as well as the manaschy S. Köchörbaev and the writer B. Jakiev.

40. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYzozAAkSW8 (accessed November 9, 2015).

41. This is the opinion of Qurmanbek Abakirov, for instance (personal communication, November 17, 2013).

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