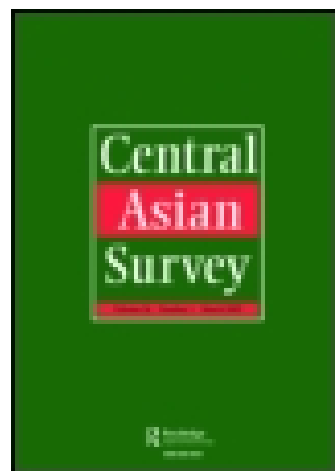




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The past and the present: The power of heroic epics and oral tradition—Manas 1000

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The past and the present: the power of heroic epics and oral tradition—Manas 1000

EWA WASILEWSKA

Introduction

The end of every millennium appears to be marked by events leading to a new political, cultural, and religious reality which then becomes the trademark of the millennium to come. The end of our millennium is probably not much different from others. One of the events which will certainly leave a lasting mark on the future is the fall of the Soviet Empire and the emergence of the newly independent states whose languages, traditions and histories were clandestine under the blanket of Communist equality and anti-cultural diversity which the Soviets called nationalism. While each of these countries is struggling on the road to a market economy, only Kyrgyzstan has summoned up its distant past to influence the future through the democratic spirit of its great cultural hero, Manas. The celebrations of the one thousandth anniversary of Manas, the national Kyrgyz hero, took place on 25–31 August 1995. I was very fortunate to participate in these celebrations which included a special symposium focused on Manas's life and the place of the Epic of Manas in world literature. Being a part of the celebration in honour of Manas allowed me to see the Epic of Manas, not only through the eyes of an outsider who tries to analyse this pearl of the Kyrgyz oral tradition, but also through the eyes of the people who carried its memory for a thousand years.

Since I am not a specialist on the subject of Central Asian literature and comparative literature in general, my approach to the Epic of Manas is somewhat different: anthropological, conceptual, cross-cultural and without time constraints. Instead of focusing on subjects that are usually discussed in reference to Manas, I decided to examine factors that are relevant for the shaping of modern reality in the newly independent Kyrgyzstan. I attempt to demonstrate that traditional oral literature, often considered a part of the mythological and legendary realm, provides the modern reader with a wealth of essential information which in turn, constitutes the basis for creating a unique identity of any

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culture. However, this information can be properly interpreted only if the reader understands the meaning of the epic for those who preserved it and thus have emotional attachment to the story. Whenever appropriate I will refer to the oldest epic known to humankind, The Epic of Gilgamesh of Sumero-Akkadian origin, which represents the tradition of a sedentary society in contrast to the nomadic tradition of the Epic of Manas. This article is limited to only a few issues in order to provide the reader with a better understanding of the region.

The Epic—general introduction

Although the Epic of Manas is among the most celebrated narratives of the Central Asian steppe and of Turkic cultures in general, only a few foreigners outside of academia have ever heard about it. While most educated people are familiar with the great literary creations of the human mind like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and/or Mahabharata, this great Kyrgyz achievement has been overlooked for a thousand years. This is quite surprising because it is the longest epic in the history of oral literature (even the *Guinness Book of Records* refers to it as such) whose longest single version, recorded from the narrator Sayakbai Karalayev, consists of over five hundred thousand poetic lines. The total is estimated at over a million. For comparison, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together have only around twenty-eight thousand lines, while the Mahabharata has about one hundred thousand couplets.¹

The Epic of Manas seems to be the only documented epic in the world whose tradition was carried in an oral form for around one thousand years before its first significant fragments were recorded in writing by famous scholars such as Ch. Valikhanov and V. V. Radlov in the 19th century. Today there are around 65 versions of the main parts of the Epic known as 'Manas', 'Semetey' (his son) and 'Seytek' (his grandson). There are also other fragments and episodes recorded from 47 narrators which are considered complementary works such as those recorded in China by the great narrator, Jusup Mamai.²

To the people of Kyrgyzstan and those of Turkic origin in general, the Epic of Manas is much more than a heroic story. This narrative is a sacred history of a people and land who, in spite of economic, political and other hardships, were able to survive, preserve their cultural identity and unify in the name of Manas. For the Kyrgyz, the epic

is our historical chronicle, spiritual foundation, cultural reality and scientific background. This epic is the spiritual leader of the Kyrgyz nation during the long process of the development, search for identity and formation of our state. It has been for many centuries our pride, our protector in hard times, and our strength and hope. The spirit of our nation is forever encoded in this epic ... Every one of us carries a piece of this epic in his and her heart'.³

This quality of the Epic of Manas has been noted in the commentary written by V. Radlov, the Russian Turkologist of the 19th century, who said: 'The Kyrgyz praise in their songs not some sort of strange and frightful world, but to the

contrary, they sing about their emotions and dreams, about these ideals which are of the highest value for every member of their society'.⁴ Since the Epic of Manas in its present form is a creation of many generations of the Kyrgyz people, these ideals have also been adjusted to the everchanging political, economic and cultural reality. Thus, the Kyrgyz reader can always find in the Epic the ideals which are closest to his or her heart. For Muslims it would be the knowledge that Manas was born into their faith and through him Islam reached people who had never heard the words of the Prophet; for women it would be the example set by wise, brave and independent women of the steppe, such as Kankey, a wife of Manas, who was instrumental in his success; for others it would be the love for the land, freedom and independence, of which Manas is the symbol. Finally, for scholars and foreigners, the Epic of Manas will forever remain the only one of its kind, a steppe encyclopedia of customs, traditions, historical facts and dreams which for centuries dominated a region whose claim to glory has been ignored in favour of the Chinese and Mediterranean civilizations it bridged.

The setting/location of stories as a reflection of attitudes toward land and state boundaries

It is a truism to repeat that attitudes toward land and state boundaries differ depending upon the subsistence strategy in any given society. This is particularly clear in the Epic of Manas where the geographical setting of various stories has varied over time, depending not only on Manas's conquests and the expansion of his people, but also on the political history of the time when the stories were told or rather recorded. For example, while the Talas Valley was believed to be the origin of Manas's line (of the Sary-Nogai tribe) in the mid-19th century epics, the Sari Bagish's version recorded by Radlov locates his birthplace 'at the mouth of the Almaty-gorge',⁵ reflecting the political reality of this tribe and its connection with Russian plans for the further development of the area.

The fact that the birthplace of Manas was manipulated in the oral tradition depending on the situation also indicates that there was no established centre of power from which nomadic raids would start and to which the nomads would return. In this sense the power was in the aul itself, not in a factual geographical location. Although this lack of a constant geographical centre can be explained partially by condensing traditions of a thousand years of the Manas Epic, the main reason is the nomadic (movable) way of life.

This is in contrast to oral and written traditions of sedentary people, as is well exemplified by the oldest epic in the history of literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh. While Gilgamesh's adventures are set in various geographical settings, his place of birth and royal power, Uruk, is referred to as the only constant element of his life. Changing this location would have meant changing the whole story, while changing a location in the Epic of Manas is only a reflection of the extension of economic and social power of the khans which the manaschi is aware of as he tells the story. Since a manaschi is more than a story teller, he/she is expected

not only to follow the main plot and artistic forms as known traditionally from masters, but also to embellish it with his/her original words and artistic expressions. A good *manaschi* must be able to add some details, explain various phenomena and respond to any intrusion or comment from listeners. Changing the location of main events seems to be a part of the *manaschi*'s skills in adjusting the Epic to the reality lived at the time of telling the story. Accepting the change of location by the general public depends not only on the educational level of the listeners and their knowledge of existing traditions but also on the perception of reality lived and the necessity to adjust to the current socio-economic and political situation of the region.

The make-up of the hero—positive and negative elements of social behaviour

As do other great epics of the past, the Epic of Manas carries the memory, whether real or ideal, of the hero who established the identity of his people for many centuries. And, as do other epics, the historicity of Manas has as many adversaries as advocates.

While all scholars unanimously agree that the Epic of Manas combines historical fact with ancient myth and legend, there is strong disagreement as to when the epic was composed and which events it reflects the most. The majority of researchers can easily point out various historical layers which represent traditions of the 9th–10th century (after overthrowing the Uighur state), of the 15th–17th centuries (Kyrgyz battles with Kalmyks), and of the 19th century, when the first versions were recorded. Some scholars, mostly of Turkic origin, postulate a much older date for the Epic, the beginning of the first millennium BC.⁶ They believe that the Epic of Manas is a national version of an old Indo-Aryan creation myth about the first human being known as Man (in Sanskrit—Manu). Over three millennia this story was enriched by Islamic ideals and nomadic/shamanistic traditions intertwined with historical events. According to these scholars, the later first millennium AD version of the Epic carries the echo of the classical Indo-Aryan struggle between the good and the bad through reference to Muslims fighting against Unbelievers (*kafirs*), who can be identified with the Chinese, fire-worshippers and those of shamanistic traditions, among others.⁷

Although such an early date for the creation of the original lines of the Epic is doubtful, it is very interesting to note that the Chinese sources of the 9th century refer to pure-blooded Yeniseyan Kyrgyz as red-haired, fair-skinned and blue/green-eyed people, which could attest to the existence of an Indo-European element in Central Asia.

However, Manas himself is described as a great Kyrgyz hero who at his miraculous birth already exhibited the characteristics of a great Asiatic warrior:

Looked like a warrior, nothing less.
Deep and wide was his manly chest,

Shoulders firm, and slim all the rest.
 Looks severe, and fierce his face,
 Elephant power one there could trace.
 Neck like a tiger, muscles no stint,
 Powerful spine and heart like flint.
 Eye-lashes smooth, and star-like eyes [reference to Asiatic brows and lashes as flat]
 Ears like a wolf, and breast tiger-wise.⁸

These typical metaphors used to describe Manas as a warrior who would lead his people in a war of independence are strengthened by his name. The ancient tradition of some Altaic tribes called for the choice of a name by the whole tribe. This name could never be changed because the fate of a person was already encoded in it. And since the destiny and mission of Manas was obviously of the greatest importance for the Kyrgyz people, the Dervish Berdike, a wise old man, selected his name by pronouncing these words:

At its beginning stands letter 'M',
 As in Mohammed's most blessed name!
 In the middle stands letter 'N',
 That means 'Nabi'—prophetic men.
 Then at its end stands the letter 'S',
 This is the tail of a Lion, no less!
 What name do these three consonants make?
 From these three letters the sounds we take,
 Reading them out we get 'MaNaS'.⁹

Although, according to the Epic, the name Manas was already used as a battle-cry before the hero Manas's birth, he is the only person among the Kyrgyz who has ever carried this name. This is the greatest tribute his people could pay to Manas and to his legendary patriotism.

While the birth of a hero in an epic tradition is always associated with miraculous events or activities soon thereafter, the future is not always prophesied (predicted) for him. While Gilgamesh, whose future is not prophesied, is a confused hero who performs his deeds basically out of boredom, Manas, whose future is prophesied, has a mission to fulfil. He has to 'open up the path of the Muslim and scatter the wealth of the Infidel'.¹⁰ Not only is he aware of his purpose in life but he also knows which countries and peoples (envoys from Yarkand, China, the Nogai Tatars) he will conquer in the future. This information certainly influences his adult behaviour: not only is he brave but also very careless since he feels secure with his life until the prophecy is fulfilled (he is revived three times in the Epic!). Since he does not have to follow established norms of social behaviour, he represents an ambiguous type of a hero, i.e. he is more human than divine.

On the one hand, Manas is to spread the Muslim faith among the infidels; on the other hand (according to the 19th century versions) he submits himself and his companions to the rule of the White Padishah, i.e. Russian infidels. 'The warrior Manas submitted to the White Padishah! ... he had become the White

Padishah's subject—he had swallowed the food he had handed down to him'.¹¹ This opportunistic behaviour of Manas indicates not only his great flexibility and ability to adjust to different political realities but also the wisdom of the *manaschis* who, in their desperation to preserve the ancient tradition of the steppe, flattered the Russians as the price for saving the Epic. The Russian policy of breaking the link to the past of Central Asia, here the Kyrgyz, was unsuccessful thanks to the versatility of the area's oral traditions.

Not only does Manas become subject to the Russian power, but his battles, although directed toward old enemies, are no longer in the name of Allah. Even his companions include those who do not follow the teachings of the Quran; as it is often said in the poem; 'of the famed Forty Companions ... Picked braves of the Muslim and the Infidels, chosen warriors of my nation and people ...'.¹² This flexibility of Manas's character and willingness to change the purpose of his life reflect the ever-changing reality of the nomadic steppe. While often the values of Islam are stressed, they do not dominate the behaviour of Manas and his companions. What counts the most is heroism and bravery—all other values are considered to be secondary.

Again, this is in contrast to Gilgamesh's behaviour. Since this king of Uruk does not know anything about his purpose in life and his destiny, his character develops from a greedy, bored king, who must be controlled by the divine council, to a caring person, fearful for his own life, on a quest for the meaning of life and glory for his people.

Manas's character does not really go through any development. His behaviour does not improve or change. Although his bravery is widely known, he is criticized for many of his actions. His bad reputation even reaches his future father-in-law, Temir-khan, who tells Jakip-khan: 'Is it not rumoured that this son of yours Manas tussles with his laws, wrangles with his friends, tangles the brothers and sisters? ...'.¹³ Even his own father reinforces this reputation by telling Temir-khan that Manas takes what he wants. Thus, if he wants to marry Temir-khan's daughter, Kanıkey, and is not given this chance, he will abduct her. However, the brutality of Manas's character is counterbalanced by his subservience to the White Padishah, who gives him gold and silver as bride-wealth. Not only does Manas accept this gift and the Padishah's advice, but he also boasts about being his servant. This seems to be very unusual for heroes of various epics who do not submit to anyone except divine forces.

All heroes in the Manas Epic are very hot-tempered. They drink too much, they strike each other any time and they talk about snatching each others' women. The internal conflicts are rarely solved completely and tension is present in every part of the Epic. Cursing and calling names is a part of everyday behaviour.

As a hero Manas fulfils his most important role in life—he unifies his people for a definite purpose, which is the conquest of the Kalmyks, Chinese and others who are considered to be unbelievers. This way he becomes a mythical king, like Menes of Egypt, who establishes the identity of his people for centuries and millennia to come. However, for the Kyrgyz people Manas is more than a

legend, he is a historical ruler who put the Kyrgyz tribes on the map. This argument can be strengthened by a reference to Manas and his battles in a Tajik manuscript of the 15th/16th century known as 'Majmu-At-Tavarih' which presents him as a historical person.¹⁴ The Kyrgyz also use various geographical places which carry the name of Manas as evidence for his historicity although objectively speaking there is no such connection. It is believed that the river Li-yi-de-Jiang has been the Manas river since the 10th century. There is a town Manas near Urumchi in China; there are canyons in the Upper Irtysh river and in the Lower Amu Darya river of the same name. The Kyrgyz extend this to towns named Manas in Spain and in Latin America, and other topographic features carrying this name in Bhutan, India, Korea, Hungary and even in the Bible as the kingdom Manasiya.¹⁵

The largest number of places associated with the Epic of Manas can be found in Kyrgyzstan. The valley of Talas has the most memories associated with Manas as his place of birth and the centre of his power. Here, one may find the Manas *gumbez* (tomb-mausoleum) inside of which are three stones. Two of them are said to represent the feet of Manas's camels while the third is his horse's heart. In spite of indisputable evidence in the form of a commemorative inscription dedicating the tomb to Kanizek-Khatun, a Chagatay princess of the early 14th century,¹⁶ this Talas *gumbez* is visited by many Kyrgyz as the burial place of their hero. Not far away from the mausoleum the proud locals show the visitor a pillar to which the beloved horse of Manas, Ak-Kula, once was tethered. This pillar competes for attention with the Manas spring and the black stone on which Manas used to strike sparks for fire.

It is interesting to note that the Western perception of Manas as based on the recorded stories of the Epic is so much different from the perception of the Kyrgyz people. This is not the matter of Manas's historicity, but rather the result of approaching the subject. While for Western scholars it is very important to see Manas as a Kyrgyz hero who converted to Islam and fought in its name; for the Kyrgyz, the Islamic connection of the Epic practically does not exist. Most of the Kyrgyz whom I interviewed, including very educated people and top government officials, were not aware of the fact that he was Muslim. Most of them totally ignored the fact that he exhibited human characteristics which are socially unacceptable. For them the only thing which counts is the fact that Manas put their nation on the map of the world in the past and through the celebrations of 1995 he leads the nation to recognition again.

The women in the hero's life and story—the status of women among sedentary and nomadic societies

The teachings of the Old Testament and Quran contributed widely to the establishment of stereotypical gender roles in the modern societies of the West and the Middle East, with men being in control of women. The justification of this control is provided by examples of women's wickedness, weaknesses, and unmanageable emotions such as those represented by Eve in the Story of

Paradise. The roots of such an approach can be found in the ancient Semitic and sedentary traditions of the Middle East as, for example, represented by the Epic of Gilgamesh. The only consequential women in this epic are: the harlot who through her charms introduced Enkidu to civilization (Eve as a harlot who made Adam taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil); Inanna-Ishtar who through her capricious nature and sexual desire is the reason for the conflict and death of Enkidu (Eve as a cause for expulsion from the Paradise); and the wife of Utnapishtim who in her desire to aid Gilgamesh helps him to learn about the plant which restores lost youth, which in turn ends up in the possession of a serpent (revealing a special relationship between woman and snakes).

While Biblical and Quranic traditions of the Middle East deny women equal partnership with men, the nomadic traditions of Central Asia acknowledge their relatively high status. Not only is their beauty praised in the Epic of Manas but also their ability to make decisions which are the underlying cause for the heroes' actions. For example, Ak-Erkech is represented as much smarter and more manipulative than her husband, Kökchö. She is the one who understands the importance and mission of Almambet, while Kökchö is driven by jealousy and pettiness.

In fact it is interesting to note that since many heroes of the Manas cycle are drunkards, their women emerge as the real heroines of the epic. This is visible not only in episodes involving Kanikey but also Joloi's wife, Ak-Saikal. She and Joloi's horse, Ach Budan, are the only ones who can force Joloi, famous for his eating and drinking habits, into actions where he can show his strength and bravery. In addition Ak-Saikal herself is recognized as a great warrior who participates in both battles and races. Ak-Saikal and another wife of Joloi, Ak-Kanysh, are the real heroines of the Joloi poem, not only controlling Joloi but saving and raising his son Bolot.

Furthermore, women are shown as those who can predict the future and whose advice should be followed. When the Khan of the Infidels, Big Joloi (of the Nogai tribe), refused to listen to his wife, Ak-Saikal, he paid for this mistake with his life. Not only was he killed by Manas but his daughters were given away to Manas's companions: [Black]Smith and Almambet. When Jakıp-khan, Almambet, and Manas did not listen to the wise advice from Jakıp's wife and Kanikey, Manas's wife, against reunion with the lost (to the Kalmyks) family of Közkaman, the price paid for their stubbornness was the death of Manas, poisoned by Közkaman's sons.

It is interesting to note that although the numbers of wives allowed to a hero in the Manas Epic is consistent with the teachings of the Quran (four), they are not treated equally. Obviously Kanikey, the third wife of Manas, is treated better and respected more not only by Manas but also by his father, Jakıp. Manas says about his wives "I had Kara-börük's daughter Kara-börük seized from the steppe, had Shooruk's daughter Akılay summoned from her yurt!—but my Khan-Father Jakıp-khan praises Kanikey!" ... 'When you rise at dawn and wash your hands and faces, then let us got to Kanikey, and if she be dutiful, let us see

it, if she be generous, let us experience it! If she does not please my heart, let us return to my Khan-Father Jakıp-bay and make a liar of him”¹⁷. Kanikey is not only beautiful and clairvoyant but also intelligent. She offers her best hospitality not only to Manas but also to his companions who are absolutely amazed by her generosity in giving them beautiful costumes and boots. Then she advises Manas against his planned raid to overtake Kalmyk trade routes. When Manas is offended by her advice and becomes violent Kanikey simply laughs at him! The same advice is given to him by his other wife, Akılay. Again he rejects it, falling into a rage. Akılay does not laugh at him—she curses him! This is not the behaviour of submissive women; this is the behaviour of independent women totally aware of their power.

Not only are women expected to honour, respect and support their heroes but they can rise to the status of a hero themselves. Orongy, an infidel woman but also a khan, commands from Manas the same respect as other men after winning the contest of untying a camel. In the process her private parts became exposed but it seems that there is nothing sexual about the reaction of the men who are watching. What is important is only the fact that she wins and deserves the prize of ingots.

Thanks only to the women, Kanikey and Ay-Chürök, are Manas's son Semetey and grandson Seytek saved from the death that was to be visited on them by their relative for unclear reasons. The two epics of the Manas series about his son and his grandson are centred around the female hero—the always brave, wise and smart Kanikey. She is probably the most celebrated woman of the Kyrgyz steppe and the only character which does not exhibit any negative characteristics. Although foreign to Manas's lineage, it is thanks to her that this lineage can survive.

When Manas dies after 32 years of marriage to Kanikey and is buried according to steppe tradition, possibly in a kurgan ‘on the banks of the Talas at (the confluence with) the river Sulpukor’¹⁸, his beloved wife according to the tradition is supposed to marry one of his younger brothers. Kanikey, who always defined her ancestry from her father khan and not through the marriage, opposes this marriage. She promises that after her child by Manas is born ‘... If by chance she is a girl, I shall burn her in the fire, I will set her on the river! Then I shall take a husband’¹⁹. Obviously she wants to save her daughter from the misery of being born without a father who would take proper care of her. But ‘... If my child is a boy, it would not be fitting for me to marry’²⁰. These words may indicate that having a male child makes the family complete, so there is no need for a new husband. This is confirmed by the decision of another, but childless wife, Akılay to marry Manas's younger brother. Kanikey is able to escape her fate and bring Semetey to the age when he can avenge his father's memory. But still it is Kanikey, not her son, who takes revenge by killing the younger brothers of Manas with her dagger.

Earth and Heaven—the reality lived and the reality perceived

The intervention of divine forces into the life of heroes differs from epic to epic,

taking sometimes very unexpected turns. While Gilgamesh, a hero whose blood is two-thirds divine, cannot prevent death from claiming him, Manas is brought back to life from the Underworld three times in stories recorded by Radlov. Somehow his revival from his first 'chronological' death is the result of actions by his Forty Companions which Hatto identifies as originating in the tradition of Forty Chiltan or Helper spirits.²¹ The second return is generated by three spirits, represented by his horse Ak-Kula and two female falcon companions (Ak-Shumkar and Ak-Taygan). This is obviously not Muslim tradition, but rather a survival of shamanistic beliefs before the spread of Islam.

This shamanistic tradition is further represented by a belief in the possibility of both heroes and horses returning from the Underworld after seven years. The shamans and shamankas in the nomadic society of Manas's steppe can be found everywhere. Not only do they have the power to predict the future and interpret dreams but also can even shift shapes as does Altinay, a Kalmyk princess, acquired by Almambet. Kara Chach of the Joloi poem not only can control the powers of darkness but can also guide Bolot on his trip through the Underworld. These spiritual-magical powers of steppe traditions are occasionally associated in the Epic with Mecca and the centre of the Islamic world. Not only is Manas revived from his death by poison at the hands of the Kalmykized Közkamans, thanks to the miraculous medicines of his father-in-law Temir-khan administered by Kankey, but his return to life is mostly achieved through 'the ministrations of the legendary Kan-kojo of Mekka.'²² His poisoned companions are able to follow his return from the Underworld thanks to Manas's trip to Mecca and his circumambulations.

In fact Islam, as represented in the Epic, is not orthodox at all. It is very much influenced by the customs of the steppe and there are no efforts to overcome any contradictions which result from the merging of Quranic and shamanistic beliefs. For example, while the Quran forbids drinking alcohol the tradition of the steppe called for all feasts being accompanied by arak (often with honey or sherbet). This is the origin of the common explanation of Central Asian Muslims that the Quran forbids only wine so everything else allowed for alcoholic consumption can be found already in the epic of the steppe.

In search of potential conflict—battles and wars of the past

While one would expect that the reasons for battles and wars led by Manas and/or his associates would be clear in the Epic, i.e. related to spreading Islam, actually the opposite is true. The duel between Manas and Er Kökchö (the Uighur hero) is one example of a conflict and battle taking place for obscure reasons. Although the disagreement seems to be over herds, which Kökchö is willing to share with Manas to avoid potential loss in case of a lost battle, the underlying reason may be the harsh treatment of Almambet, Manas's milk brother, by Kökchö.

This is even more interesting considering the fact that it was Almambet who may have betrayed Kōkchō, who not only was his friend but had also introduced him to the Muslim religion, thus opening for Almambet his path to Heaven. Almambet's demands and his insults toward Kōkchō, manipulated by his senior wife Ak-Erkech, caused the break between these two warriors.

The other confusion is created by Manas's submission to the White Padishah for whom he promises to destroy various peoples. Obviously the reason for destroying them has nothing to do with the original purpose of Manas's life (to spread Islam), but deals rather with the political reality of the 19th century expansion of Russians into the region.

While the conversion to Islam of various heroes such as Almambet and Kōzkaman seems to be a rather fast and uncomplicated process, the underlying reason is an alliance of economic and political extension rather than actual faith. The necessity of Islamization justifies various actions against the Infidels including desecration of their holy places such as the Buddhist shrines of the Kalmyks. Even without religious justification, Manas feels that he can attack any group simply for economic reasons, such as when he decides to cut off Kalmyk trade routes (Kōzkaman).

Social hierarchy as a reflection of societal values and needs

The Epic of Manas, which was produced under the rather egalitarian rules of the nomadic steppe, also exhibits elements indicating the existence of a social hierarchy that had to be maintained in order to prevent potential conflict. For example, Almambet refuses to talk to any one except those of the same class: 'I am of khanly station and shall speak my words to your Khan; I am of princely station and shall speak my words to your Prince.'²³ Furthermore, in order to secure equal status, the ceremony of establishing brotherhood through suckling the same mother's breasts (milk brothers) is also mentioned in the Epic of Manas (Almambet and Manas as milk brothers).

In contrast, the Epic of Gilgamesh exhibits typical features of hierarchical urban societal organization. While Gilgamesh as king of Uruk is alone on top of the hierarchical ladder, his newly 'acquired' companion, Enkidu, becomes his equal through his strength, which is demonstrated in his fight with Gilgamesh. Thus, the physical 'contest' is the way of establishing brotherhood in this epic. In contrast, the Epic of Manas uses physical contests as the means to establish the social hierarchy which otherwise would be difficult to justify.

The importance of etiquette and procedures (protocol) as a means to peaceful resolution of a potential conflict

In Radlov's 'Bok-murun' which is 'The memorial feast for Kōkötöy-khan', Manas is the one who calls for a race between the Muslims and the Infidels to

prevent 'pollution' of the feast and the troubling of Bok-murun's heart.²⁴ Not only is the horse race a means to cool down hot tempers, but also the dispute about the validity and grace of particular horses allows one to establish the hierarchical ladder of this seemingly unorganized group of nomadic warriors. The search for brave and strong warriors for a wrestling ring not only indicates the values of the steppe but also the order in which the great khans should be asked to represent Manas and his ideals.

Although many contests are introduced in order to prevent the spilling of blood, contests themselves may lead to conflict as represented by the horse race between Ak-Kula and Ach-Budan which eventually ended up with a bloody battle between the Muslims and Infidels (Bok-murun).

While battles and contests are considered to be proper and brave solutions to any kind of dispute, other ways, such as poisoning, represent the 'Kalmyk way' associated with cowardliness and perfidy. The betrayal of Manas by Közkaman's sons led by Kökchököz is an example of such an action that might be expected not only from Kalmyks but also from those who are raised in their environment. They can be 'Kalmykized' by the mother which also stresses the importance of woman's role in shaping the society.

Conclusions

While many people recognize the value of oral and written traditions mostly for the study of the past, I believe that they are also very important for the study of the present and the future. National epics such as the Epic of Manas allow a careful researcher to extract elements that are essential for designing various programmes for the future. For example, since the Epic of Manas clearly indicates that there is no tradition of land ownership among the Kyrgyz people, it would be expected that the privatization process in Kyrgyzstan will not include the land. Actually as of April 1995 laws and regulations have been adopted governing land rights in Kyrgyzstan which grant ownership interests in buildings and improvements to private parties while the land itself continues to be owned by the government.

Economic conditions in Kyrgyzstan have deteriorated over the last several years as the result of a declining real economy and inflationary pressure. The International Monetary Fund estimates that real GDP in Kyrgyzstan declined by 5 per cent in 1991, 19 per cent in 1992, and 26.5 per cent in 1994. The government estimates that 40 per cent or more of Kyrgyz families live below the poverty level. However, people are still looking forward to the future believing that it will be better than the past they experienced. The traditional values of the steppe, such as loyalty and the determination to reach a goal, supported by a competitive spirit and hard work, will certainly contribute to building a new, independent Kyrgyz Republic. While some people worry that conservative forces of religious, i.e. Islamic origin will impede development, especially in the area of social issues (including the secondary status of women), the Epic of Manas demonstrates clearly that the tradition of the steppe is much stronger than

the tradition of orthodox Islam. Actually the celebrations of Manas's birthday in August 1995 demonstrated clearly that for the majority of Kyrgyz the issue of religion is non-existent with regard to the public life. Not even once was the Islamic connection of the Epic of Manas brought up except for rather limited discussions during the symposium. The ideas of the Epic which were strongly emphasised during official celebrations around the country, were those of unity for all people as well as bravery and hardship which eventually would lead to the recognition of Kyrgyzstan as one of the most democratic countries in the world.

The steppe tradition in relation to gender issues was also emphasized both by men and women during numerous interviews I conducted in Bishkek and in the rural and steppe areas of the Kyrgyz Republic. While Manas and his behaviour are considered to be the most valid example to follow for men, Kanıkey and her behaviour are represented as an example of a typical woman of the steppe. It is interesting to note that while men are allowed to 'make mistakes', women are looked upon as those who have responsibility to correct them and take a lead in any situation in which a man can be 'pronounced' incompetent. Using the example of Kanıkey, many Kyrgyz pointed out during interviews that 'behind every great man is his woman', a woman who, like Kanıkey, knows the goal and is ready to sacrifice everything to reach it. This type of approach is obviously the result of the steppe tradition which is crowded with strong women ruled by brains rather than by emotions like women often presented in the Middle Eastern tradition. Currently in Kyrgyzstan, women hold high positions both in the government and private institutions, even in industries such as construction which are usually considered to be the domain of men. This situation is not likely to change since, as it was demonstrated above, the traditions of the steppe still dominate the country.

These nomadic traditions so well exhibited in the Epic of Manas constitute the basis for the future, democratic development of modern Kyrgyzstan. However, the most important function of the Epic of Manas still remains its unifying quality which allows the people of Kyrgyzstan to redefine their own identity after hundreds of years of foreign rule. This is the greatest accomplishment of this creation of the Kyrgyz nomads.

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