

Remembering Manas

The Manas epic takes up a specific position in Central Asian commemoration culture. Unlike the central figures of the cults of Genghiz Khan and Timur, Manas has not proven to be a historic figure. Attempts to harness this mythical ancestor for political purposes date back to the Soviet period and continue until today. As I will show, however, the internal dynamics of storytelling that make Manas an attractive tool for nation building, eventually backfire and undermine the authority of those who employed it.

Nienke van der Heide



Manas narration as commemoration

Each Manas narration is an act of commemoration. As the story unfolds, an imagery of ancient practices and wisdom is conjured up, creating in the listeners' minds a connection with people from a distant past – individuals with names and personalities who many Kyrgyz consider to be their direct ancestors. The old ways of living become almost palpable, the trials and tribulations tangible, the heroic acts a source of pride, the defeat and treason a source of grief, shame and anger. Through the tales of Manas and his companions, narrator and audience become emotionally engaged in a nomadic past in all its complexities – without having to live the tribulations themselves. In sharing these emotions, the audience experiences a connectedness in which the past is romanticised and alternative ways of living are juxtaposed to the present, and actually experienced, tribulations.

Not surprisingly, political elites have attempted to harness this connective potential for political purposes. In the history of the Manas epic, political actors ranging from nomadic manaps, to Soviet Party leaders, to post-Soviet politicians, have incorporated the Manas epic into their political discourses. As a heroic tale, however, the Manas epic has a dynamic of its own. A story cannot survive for centuries if it does not speak of evil as well as good, of discord as well as community, of failure as well as success. Whereas in political rhetoric, the good must always conquer the bad, a good story surpasses this good-and-bad divide and portrays the complexities involved in surviving in a social world. The richness of an epic tale provides a versatility that seems to suit politicians' purposes very well: there is always a storyline to match a particular political position. As history has shown, however, the dynamics of the tale cannot be controlled and the multiplicity of social meanings awarded to the epic always catches up with the political player.

Storytelling and transcendence

In Kyrgyzstan today, many consider the Manas epic to be more than just a tale. Manas narration is surrounded with mystique. Manaschis speak of dream inspiration: most of them have been called to their profession in a vocation dream and they often receive images and storylines through dreams and visions. Occasionally, Manaschis will even recite in their sleep, performing a recital that is audible for their fellow sleepers, but will not wake up the Manaschi. There are many tales of people in the audience being healed after listening to Manas narration. Many people understand this by reference to the transcendental nature of narrating: Manaschis are in direct contact with ancestral spirits, thus opening up a connection through which healing energy emanates.

Tourists on the Ala-Too Square in front of the statue of Manas. (photo by author)

The idea of transcendence through storytelling is not particular to the Manas epic. Many anthropologists have described instances of the human capacity for “a unique exteriority of being – an ex-tasis – that locates us ‘elsewhere’ and ‘otherwise’ even as it is grounded in and tethered to our live body’s ‘here’ and ‘now’” and have pointed out how this capacity for transcendence is mediated through storytelling in oral or visual form.¹ Anthropologist Birgit Meyer, who discusses Pentacostally inspired Ghanaian video movies, speaks of trans-figuration to describe “practises through which an imaginary expressed through (...) narratives, including visions and dreams, is pictorialized in movies and feeds back into narratives and the inner imagination”.² In Manas narration we can discern a similar dialectical relationship between dreams and stories, as narrators and audiences find the extraordinary made imaginable when these images link up to their inner imaginations. As this imagery is synchronised in storytelling, a profound sense of connectedness is created that exceeds verbalised commitment to the ethnic group.

In this experience of transcendence, Manas and his companions are remembered as mythical and true ancestors at the same time. Although historical proof of their actual existence is lacking, for many people the connection they sense when encountering Manas in narration or other art forms, or during their dreams and prayers, cannot be discarded that easily. However, as these experiences are typically cast into an ethno-nationalist framework, in which the Manas epic comes to represent the pride of the Kyrgyz nation, empiricist approaches to the epic are inevitably evoked. For those who are excluded from the Kyrgyz nation, questions on the origins of Manas and the Manas epic evolve around the idea that perhaps, attempts to use the epic as symbol for the Kyrgyz nation are based on falsifications and illusions, leading towards misguided and possibly dangerous policies.

Manas and Kyrgyzzness: the dialectics of group identification and nation building

In ethno-nationalist rhetoric, the Manas epic is uncritically described as a work of art that captures the essence of the great and ancient Kyrgyz nation. In Western scholarship, on the other hand, the notion that the Kyrgyz nation is a very recent Soviet invention, and that present-day nationalism can only be understood as a product of the Soviet nationalities policy, is often accepted in an equally uncritical fashion, leading to a tendency to regard ethnic symbols such as the Manas epic as objects of political machinations. The intricate relationship between popular group identifications and

ON 27 NOVEMBER 2015, at noon, thirteen Manas narrators (Manaschis) embark on an enormous endeavour: they will narrate the ancient oral epic ‘Manas’ for seven days and seven nights on end, unceasingly. The Manaschis will take turns, picking up the storyline where the other has ended. Before they commence, the Manaschis and the organisers of the event sacrifice a mare in honour of the ancestral spirits, hoping that the spirits of the epic characters will guide and protect the Manaschis during their seven day recital.

Dressed in their finest robes, the Manaschis sit on a decorated padded plaid at the head of a yurt-shaped building. In a cadence specific to Manas narrating, they recount of the deeds of Manas, his suffering, his mistakes, his victories. Hundreds of people visit the event in the Ethnocomplex Dasmiya, in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek. They spend a few hours in the yurt-shaped venue to listen to the tales of Manas and his companions. Some of the visitors, among whom a number of parliamentary deputies, have come to ask for the Manaschis’ blessings for their work. They bring along livestock to sacrifice or gifts for the narrators and pray with the Manaschis that are waiting for their turn to narrate.

On the final day of the recital marathon, the sponsor of the event, a traditional dress company, presents the narrators with an expensive laptop computer. Three of the Manaschis are awarded a quality watch by the prime minister. As he hands them over on stage, the prime minister announces that from this day on, the 4th of December will be an official national holiday: Manas Day.

political harnessing of these sentiments are too often simplified to stress one side of what is in fact a dialectical relationship. It takes attentive and careful study of the interconnectedness of Kyrgyz ethnic identification and nation building efforts to overcome this binary approach.

If we examine the first recordings of the Manas epic closely, to unravel the interconnection of the epic and Kyrgyz identification, we find that by the 1880s, Manas was not portrayed as an ethnic Kyrgyz in the tales. Manas was referred to as a Muslim, a Sari Nogoï and a Sart, but never as a Kyrgyz. The very few cases where the Kyrgyz are mentioned, it is in a derogatory way; for instance when Manas’ father scolds “the Kyrgyz who never stop to be greedy, who keep begging and drinking and are never full”,³ or when the narrator tells of how Manas killed all Kyrgyz boys and took the Kyrgyz girls.⁴ Still, the epic, as well as the narrators, are described as a Kyrgyz epic (or rather: kara-Kyrgyz, a Russian ethnonym that is understood to denote the ancestors of the present-day Kyrgyz) by the collectors of the tales, Wilhelm Radloff and Chokan Valikhanov. By the early 1920s, in the version recorded from Saginbai Orozbekov’s mouth, Manas is undoubtedly an ethnic Kyrgyz, as well as a Muslim.⁵ We can thus conclude that before the Soviet nationalities policy was implemented, a sense of Kyrgyzzness was connected to the epic, be it not as unequivocally as it is today.

Connected to the past, connected in the present

During the seventy years of Soviet regime, a variety of attitudes to and policies on the Manas epic can be discerned. In the early years, there was little support for Manaschīs and the collectors of the epic, much to the frustration of the Great Manaschī Sagīnbai Orozbekov.⁶ As the national delimitation proceeded, during which the Tsarist territory was structured into ethnically organised socialist republics and autonomous regions, a new approach to oral epics arose. Understood as folklore, oral epics formed an integral part of the nationalities policy that aimed to create a structure that was 'nationalist in form, socialist in content'. By the 1930s, strengthened by Maxim Gorki's appeal to view folklore as the expression of the deepest moral aspirations of the masses, a number of Kyrgyz writers and scholars had managed to publish Manas verses. The Manas epic in written form was connected to the effort of bringing literacy to the nomads. At the same time, the Soviet regime portrayed itself as rescuer of folk art, in the same way it had rescued the people from the yoke of their feudal lords and Muslim clerics.

During the 1936-38 purges, however, most members of the cultural and political elite were murdered, including those who had championed the Manas epic.⁷ The Soviet policies that had invoked Manas as a folkloric masterpiece that could entice the Kyrgyz nomads into modernity dwindled in the face of Stalinist terror. This was the first time that using the Manas for political purposes turned against the protagonists – although the Manas epic seems to have played a minor role in the downfall of the new political elite.

When in the 1940s the window for ethnic projects was opened in an attempt to keep all nations committed to the Great Patriotic War, Manas activities resumed, only to be discredited again by the 1950s. At a national conference on the Manas epic, following a wave of condemning national epics of the Tatar, Turkmen, Nogai, Kazakh and others, a compromise was reached: the Manas epic was considered to be a respectable exemplar of the art of the Kyrgyz people, but it had to be purged of feudal-clerical elements in order to fit the Soviet project. The connection with Kyrgyzness remained intact, but only within the strict boundaries of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Already in 1974, however, the state once again capitalised on the connective power of Manas imagery by naming the newly built airport 'Manas Airport', and in 1981 a set of seven statues of historic Manaschīs and three characters from the epic was erected outside the capital's Philharmonic building. By the 1980s, academic commitment to original texts rekindled the publication of the original recordings of the 1910s, including the allegedly feudal-clerical elements. With the advent of perestroika, the internal dynamics of the Manas tale swirled its political significance out of the course delineated by the Soviet regime. No longer confined to the straightjacket of socialist ideology, other elements of the epic were foregrounded, now representing a pre-Soviet past that originated in times previous to Russian domination. Even though the appraisal of Russians interference in Kyrgyz life remains a topic of dispute in Kyrgyzstan today, with a large majority stressing the positive influence of the Russians, over time, voices that recount Soviet and Russian domination have increased, sometimes accumulating in a blaming narrative where the Soviet regime is held responsible for suppressing vital elements of Kyrgyz culture. The Manas epic, as the quintessence of Kyrgyz culture, now came to represent an ancient nation in its struggle for independence.

The holy hill of Chech Döbö, where Almambet, Manas' best friend, was supposedly buried. (photo by author)

Harnessing the Manas in independent Kyrgyzstan

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, nation building assumed an entirely different dynamic, as the Kyrgyz Republic was no longer a unit within the Soviet structure but a political entity of its own. For many residents, this meant a reorientation of their ethnicity in the light of citizenship. People of Kyrgyz ethnicity were suddenly the owners of an independent country, people of other ethnicities often felt they had unexpectedly become immigrants. President Akayev promised to strengthen Kyrgyz nationhood, but was equally committed to creating a civic state in which inhabitants of different ethnicities felt at home. The violent clashes between Özbeks and Kyrgyz in the Ferghana valley, as well as the imminent brain drain of Russians, Jews and Germans, were worries that kept the Akayev government from pursuing an ethno-nationalist course without careful consideration. Building on the Soviet reputation of the Manas epic as valuable cultural heritage, Akayev proposed seven principles based on the epic that could function as independent Kyrgyzstan's national ideology. These principles carefully navigated the epic's controversial themes: ethnic tensions, religious antagonism and the threat posed by China. Instead, the principles spoke of 'ethnic pride', 'friendship between nationalities', 'relentless work and advanced industry', 'respect for nature' and 'humanism, nobility and forgiveness'.

In a grand display of Kyrgyz cultural richness, a UNESCO-sponsored commemoration of 1,000 years of the Manas epic was held in 1995. A sumptuous feast featuring an abundance of ethnic symbolism, such as horse sports, decorated yurts and komuz music, was hosted for international guests of standing. The Manas was recited and battle scenes from the epic were acted out by beautifully dressed horseback riders. Popular attitudes towards the festival were ambiguous. Although ethnic pride was boasted and many people were actively and proudly involved in the feast through yurt making competitions and Manas recitals, at the backdrop of a devastated economy, people questioned the government's priorities. Out of the 8 million US\$ spent on the commemoration feast, the three Great Manaschīs, who ought to have been the core carriers of the festival, received nothing but a ticket for free public transport and a second-rate wristwatch.

An unanticipated effect of tying Kyrgyz ethnic pride to imagery from the Manas epic, was that identification with the image of the Kyrgyz nomadic spirit was strengthened. During the two popular revolutions that shook independent Kyrgyzstan's political landscape in 2005 and 2010, the idea that the Kyrgyz, as sons of Manas, are a freedom-loving nomadic nation that do not bow to bad leaders was used for drawing courage to remain standing in the face of snipers. In less heated times, both Manaschīs and politicians tried to present the nomadic way of life as an alternative to global capitalism that destroyed Kyrgyzstan's social and environmental fabric. The Manas epic became once again a tool of resistance to the very government that had championed its political significance.

Reasserting ownership of the Manas epic

After independence, people involved in the Manas epic reconstructed the Soviet past as a time when ownership of the Manas epic had been ceded. The Soviet state had incorporated the Manas epic in its cultural activities under

the flag of internationalism, but severely restricted the forms in which Manas could be commemorated. Twenty years after independence, Manaschīs gradually introduced new forms of Manas narration that they considered more traditional than Soviet-style performances. The Manas marathon described on this page (see text box) was the second of a seven-day-seven-night Manas narration that has strong potential for becoming a yearly commemoration, as this type of performance both appeals to audiences and yields state support. The successor of socialism, international capitalism, thus did open up the freedom to create new forms of Manas remembrance, but brought along an even more intense experience of loss of agency. In an increasingly pluralised political and religious social landscape, where many people struggle to survive economically, worries about the many potential sources of conflict are ubiquitous.

Manas narration in its present-day context is, as an act of commemoration of a nomadic, pre-socialist and pre-capitalist past, often understood within an ethno-nationalist framework, which provides narrators and audiences with a sense of ownership and agency. Although these practices do not occur in a void outside of the global capitalist system, they create temporary imaginaries of an alternative life where people can envision strife without feeling the actual pain. In this safe heaven, however, the danger of ethnic discord created by ethno-nationalism is often ignored by those who portray the Manas epic as Kyrgyz cultural heritage. The future will tell whether the internal dynamics of the epic tale once again prove to be stronger than those who attempt to harness it for political stability.

Nienke van der Heide (Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University) conducted cultural anthropological field research in Kyrgyzstan for two years between 1996 and 2000 and for shorter periods starting from 2015. She worked closely with Manas narrators and their audiences. Her dissertation on the Manas epic, *Spirited Performance, the Manas Epic and Society in Kyrgyzstan* came out in 2008 and was published in a revised version in 2015 (n.van.der.heide@fsw.leidenuniv.nl).

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