

# SMALL EPICS AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF ORAL EPIC CREATIVITY OF KYRGYZ PEOPLE

CHINARA BEKSULTANOVA

Institute of History and Cultural Heritage

of National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic

The rich folklore of the Kyrgyz people is an important historical and cultural phenomenon developing over many centuries and spiritually and artistically valuable. As an inexhaustible source of people's wisdom, it reflects the history, life and social, political and spiritual ideals of the people. The oral folklore is the basis of our unique cultural heritage. Due to the harsh conditions of the nomadic life, endless clashes with enemies and invaders, and long distances of migration, the Kyrgyz people have not preserved their spiritual culture in the stone monuments of architecture, papyrus or clay writings but have preserved it in their memory for more than two thousand years of history. Memory proved to be good enough for keeping millions of lines of epic songs and works, which have been passed from generation to generation and reached the present day.

Keeping the world and centuries-long historical experience of the people, epics occupy a significant place among the Kyrgyz people. The classic epic of nomadic culture has developed from fairy tales and mythological works to the historical and heroic epic novels<sup>1</sup>.

The principal ideas of the Kyrgyz epic are focused on human values,

reflected in the main epic characters demonstrating heroic valour, restrained wisdom, tolerance and loyalty to the friendship ideals. The epics have reached us in oral form, coming from early ages, and we should not forget this fact when identifying the main features of the national folklore.

Having existed for many centuries in almost the same social condition, the folklore of the Kyrgyz people appeared to be in a completely new situation in the 20th century, which made it quite impossible to pass the epic oral traditions. The traditional civilisation faced with technological genesis leading to radical transformation of the existing culture and lifestyle of the Kyrgyz people, which resulted in the disappearance of genres. In contemporary circumstances, recording in a written form became the only way to preserve the Kyrgyz epics.

Realizing the dramatic situation in the spiritual sphere, people began to seek the ways to preserve the traditional folk culture. As a result, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted at the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003, which maintains that 'Protection of intangible cultural heritage is an invaluable factor for bringing human beings closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among people'. In 2003, 28 elements was proclaimed as 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity', among which the art of folk storytellers (*akyns*) of Kyrgyzstan was included under the name of 'The art of tellers of epics (*akyns*) as a part of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'.

It is well-known that tradition is an inherent property of folklore in general. Narrators (*akyns*) strengthen the live link between generations, developing the meaning of the Word in the oral tradition. Preservation of such a high heritage of literary art in the people's memory was an essential need of the society and they have developed and reflected the

real ideological system. The oral improvisatory poetry *tekme* is its basis. The improvisatory art is the core of the Kyrgyz folklore, its centrifugal force. Through the epics, we can get an answer to the question what the nomadic civilisation gave to the humanity, what we found and lost in this historic process or which role it played in the self-identification of the ethnos.

The runic writing named *Orkhon-Enisey* originated in Central Asia. All these factors turned the ancient Kyrgyz state into one of the main centres of the Turkic civilisation. The origin and formation of these magnificent epics could be based on a direct result as a response from Kyrgyz people to the countless disasters that had happened to them in the past, after the decline of the Kyrgyz state and their migration to the *Tien-Shan*, their historical territory, where their next stage of history was associated with the struggles with the *Kara-kitai* and *Djungar* people and conquest of Genghis Khan.

Small epics take special and very important place in the treasury of cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people<sup>2</sup>. 'Small epics' in the oral folklore of Kyrgyz people combined various topics of epic songs, which are not included in the trilogy *Manas*, *Semetei* and *Seytek*. The term 'small epic' does not determine precisely the thing, since the volume of each of them is significant. The total number of small epics varies from 16 to 20. It is difficult to define the number more precisely because of the classification of the genre.

Kyrgyz folklore has a tradition of dividing small epics into the following genre groups:

1. Mythological (*Kojojash*, *Er-Tyoshtyuk*, *Joodarbeshim*);
2. Heroic (*Djanyl-Myrza*, *Kurmanbek*, *Janysh-Baiysh*, *Al-Tabylidy*, *Seyitbek*, *Shyrdakbek*);
3. Social and living (*Kedeykan*, *Mendirman*);
4. Lyrical and romantic (*Oldjobay* and *Kishimdjan*, *Sarinji-Byokey*).

The epics *Kojojash* and *Er-Tyoshtyuk* are ancient epic songs, which were composed during the tribal system. These epics have retained traces of the archaic mythological worldview of Kyrgyz people in their plot and reflected the peculiarity of their perception of the world as primary mythological concepts, such as totemism, animism and fetishism. The subjects of the epics *Kojojash* and *Er-Tyoshtyuk* mainly reflect the interests of the tribal collective in which single hero is the main character, pursuing the goal of preserving the family, as opposed to the representatives of the world of nature.

The epic *Kojojash* has reached us in three versions which are recorded from the narrators S. Konokbaev (1923), A. Usenbaev (1938) and T. Jeentaev (1949) at different times. The history of hunter *Kojojash* existed in the form of an oral prose and consisted of stories and legends. However, the song and epic form of the tale is more traditional, since the epic *Kojojash* was presented in the active repertoire of many well-known Kyrgyz storytellers. All three versions of the epic contain similar elements of plot. Central conflict, reflecting the opposition of the hunter and protector of wild cloven-hoofed animal *Echki Sur* (grey goats) is common for each of them. The version of the narrator A. Usenbaev is considered the most complete and highly artistic. This version contains the background of confrontation of *Kojojash* with *Echki Sur*.

In the mythology of the ancient Kyrgyz people there is a belief in the existence of spirits, protectors of wildlife<sup>3</sup>. As we see from the contents of the epic *Kojojash*, the hero pays for his relentless pursuit to prove their superiority over the patroness of wild mountain animals. In this central theme, we can see the echo of the totemic beliefs of the ancient Kyrgyz people. Most probably, the idea of inevitability of retribution for violation of human totem taboo is presented in the epic. Ancient human perception

of the world considered in close connection with the natural world around him, trying to justify the need for natural human needs, limiting its activity against the world of wildlife sacred taboos. Profound folk wisdom, which remains relevant in the modern era, where the eternal confrontation is revealed between man and nature forms the story of the epic.

The epic *Er-Tyoshtyuk* is a classic example of the epic of the early tribal system in which the most complete form of mythological picture of the world of the ancient Kyrgyz people is represented. The hero of the epic travelled to the underworld, where he fought with monsters and giants to set free kidnapped people and return them to their native land. The plot of this epic song was widespread among many Turkic peoples of Southern Siberia and Central Asia. It is a well-known fairy story version of the hero *Tyoshtyuk* in the folklore of Kazakh, Bashkir, Tatar and Uzbek peoples. According to the scientists, this circumstance indicates the fact that the plot basis of the epic song about the hero *Tyoshtyuk* formed in ancient times, when the Turkic peoples just appeared. The works of P.A Falev, V.M. Zhirmunsky, H.G Koroglu, S. Zakirov, J. Suvanbekov, S. Kayipov and K. Sadykov are devoted to the study of this epic<sup>4</sup>. Most researchers agree that this epic has passed all stages, from the myth to the heroic and epic tale during its historical evolution. The last phase of its existence was associated with the inclusion of *Tyoshtyuk* in the characters of the epic *Manas*.

The epic songs of heroic content, which are based on stories about the struggle of heroes against foreign invaders, belong to the next genre group of 'small epics'. The main events of the epic songs reflect the historical era of confrontation of Oirat Jungar invasion, dated to the 16th and 18th centuries, which is common for many Turkic peoples. The Mongol speaking representatives of Oirat state received the name *Kalmak* among the Turkic people and just under this name they appear in the Kyrgyz epic *Kurmanbek*, *Al-Tabyldy*,

*Al-Salton, Janyl Myrza, Seyitbek*<sup>5</sup>. There are a number of common features in the poetics of these stories that distinguish them from the previous mythical epic songs. They present a new interpretation of the heroic ideal associated with the chanting of the high spiritual qualities of a hero, his valour and courage. High spiritual qualities of the heroes of these epic stories are presented in self sacrificing for the sake of the protection of the native people and native land from foreign enemies and oppressors. Also, the theme of the internal unity of the people, the struggle of the characters with those who weaken this unity by their intrigues and betrayal become topical in these epic songs. Often a tragic death of the hero causes quarrels among relatives and entourage.

The tale about warrior-maiden *Janyl Myrze* is distinguished by special peculiarity among the epics about folk heroes. The time of formation of this epic story also refers to the historical period of the 16th and 18th centuries.

One of the features of the Kyrgyz nomadic culture is associated with the definition of the place of women in traditional Kyrgyz society, which is reflected in the epic. The respect for the woman, which is regarded as the best heroic quality, has existed in the nomadic mentality from ancient times.

It should be noted that the performance of small epics has its own specifics. As a rule, small epics, except the epic *Er-Tyoshtyuk*, are not performed by storytellers, but performed by singers - *akyns* and are accompanied by a musical instrument. This fact has left a unique imprint not only on the poetics of small epics but also on their ideological and aesthetic content and thematic diversity.

The last group of the genre of small epics is represented by epic songs of lyrical content, on the formation of which the changed social conditions

of the life affected. These conditions have caused interest in the sphere of private life, defined the importance of ethics and needs for lighting in oral poetic art. An extension of the intercultural relations of Kyrgyz people with neighbors in the region could be considered as another factor that influenced on their development as a special genre group, in which the oral creativity of the form of lyrical songs has deep traditional roots. However, the Kyrgyz epic songs *Sarindji-Byokei*, *Oldjobay and Kishimdjan*, *Kedeykan*, *Janysh-Baiysh* have their national roots, since they are based on the long tradition of epic poetry of the preceding period, reflecting the social and domestic problems<sup>6</sup>.

The plot of the epic *Kedeykan*, like that of the epic *Kurmanbek*, reflects the late feudal era, in which a clear class differentiation is shown between rich and poor people. The very name of the main character of the epic *Kedeykan* means 'khan of the poor', which gathers the peers among the poor people, with whom he takes vengeance on bai people, attacking and hijacking their herds. *Kedeykan*, endowed with a clear mind, wins in a verbal duel with a man who is one of Khan's closest persons. *Khan Azimkan* passes his throne to the brave young man as a result of a bet. After becoming *Khan*, *Kedeykan* ruled according to laws of justice, protecting the interests of disadvantaged people.

The epic *Sarindji-Bokey* reflects the social problems of the people, where the family conflict between brothers *Bokey* and *Jamgyrchi* is widely described. Before his death, *Jamgyrchi* asks his brother *Bokey* to bring up his youngest son *Sarindji*. After the death of *Jamgyrchi Khan*, there was a conflict between *Sarindji* and *Bokey*, who wanted to take away the bride of *Sarinji*, beauty *Bermet*, against her will, the young woman having been engaged to him since their childhood. After numerous events and struggles against insidious *Bokey*, *Sarinji* saves his bride *Bermet* from *Bokey* and takes

vengeance on his uncle for all their troubles.

Original epic *Janysh-Baiysh*, both conceptually and in terms of a plot, was formed in the conditions of ethnic and cultural relations with the Turkic-Mongol epic heritage. Some of the motifs of the epic have similarity with the Uzbek epic *Alpamysh* and with Altai epic *Alyp Manash*, in particular, the motifs of captivity during sleep, an invulnerable hero, captured and imprisoned in the dungeon, and rescued with the help of a horse. The epic, according to the scholars, has preserved relics of ancient tales - hero *Baiysh* does not sink in the water, does not burn in fire, cannot be killed by a bullet; wonderful horse Janysh can speak. This confirms that the epic formed and evolved from the earliest times of formation of tribal relations till the late feudal system, covering different stages of history of Kyrgyz people. This is also confirmed by the late epic layer of the tale, where the events related to the invasion of jungarian conquerors are referred to the late Middle Ages (15th and 18th centuries); there Kalmak represents the collective image of the enemy of this period. Thus, the epic *Janysh-Baiysh* describes the heroic struggle of the heroic brothers with the worst enemy of the people, Kalmak.

The plot movement in the epics necessarily involves rituals associated with the birth and the naming of a future hero, a warrior; also there are wedding and household rites, such as wellwishes, conspiracies, laments, wills - this is the traditional background, on which the main script of the epic is built.

Thus, it should be noted that the socio-historical conditions in the history of the formation and existence of small epics caused replacement of certain archaic stories by new, historical ones, which blocked many mythological layers with the layers of people struggling with the Kalmyk invaders.

The history of the study of small epics started in 1956, when the first

extended meeting of the Academic Council of the Institute of Language and Literature 'About the people of small epics' under the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz SSR took place. The main steps for the study of small epics and the first steps to address the compositional differences between existed versions on systematisation of materials and specific attention to the study of the foundations of traditional epics were outlined.

The works of K. Asanaliev, K. Rysaliev, J. Tashtemirov, R. Z. Kydyrbaev were devoted to the study of problems of 'small epics', plot development and poetics. Exploring the *Sarinji Bokey*<sup>7</sup> and *Janyl Myrza*<sup>8</sup> R. Z. Kydyrbaeva analyses the epic in strict accordance with the textual principles, based on all known recorded epics of that time, which are principle today. They were recorded in the most active period of collecting folklore texts, and, most importantly, in the conditions of natural existence of the epic. Comparative analysis of the available versions were carried out, defining the era of creation of the epic (domination of Kalmyk people over Kyrgyz people), details of the main character is revealed, parallel has been carried out with the epics of other nations (*Kalevala*, a poem about Joan of Arc, etc.).

*Er Tyoshtyuk* is a substantial monograph of Kyrgyz scholars and folklorists S. Zakirova<sup>9</sup>, J. Subanbekov<sup>10</sup>, B. Kebekovoy<sup>11</sup>, S. Kaipova<sup>12</sup>, K. Sadykova<sup>13</sup> devoted to small epics.

Research study was completed with a comparative analysis of four versions of Kyrgyz epic with Kazakh version - *Er-Tyoshtyuk* and one for the Western Siberian Tatars - *Yirtyushlyuk*.

The foretelling of Sayakbay Karalaev of epic 'Er-Tyushtyuk' was translated into French. In 1965, the epic was published in Paris under the title of 'The wonderful adventure of *Er Tyushtyuk*, the giant of steppes, to the underground and other places' (An epic of the *Manas* series)<sup>14</sup>. The work of N. E. Nikiporets, 'New foreign editions of the epic of the Soviet peoples' was

devoted to this edition. In his work, the author quotes French researchers: 'Kyrgyz people ... have a rare advantage of having preserved to this day the tradition of passing epic tales, the volume and richness of which are highly remarkable'<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, small epics of the Kyrgyz people have different aspects, which cover a variety of sides of peoples' life. Today, our primary task is to publish the epic *Manas*, the original small epics, folklore and legends. Promotion and popularisation of the best examples of national culture is a spiritual foundation for the patriotic upbringing of citizens, raising national self-identity, giving importance to universal values, and contributing to further understanding among the peoples and nations in the modern world.

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