

# TRILOGY OF THE EPIC 'MANAS. SEMETEV, SEYTEK' AS NATIONAL IDENTITY OF KYRGYZ PEOPLE

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The epic *Manas* occupies a central place in the spiritual culture of the Kyrgyz people as a consolidating factor of the ethnos and basis for self-identity. The significance of the epic in the treasury of human heritage was recognised by the world community in 1995. The resolution 'On celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Kyrgyz National Epos *Manas* was adopted at the 49th session of the UN General Assembly carried out by UNESCO and UNDP. The 1000th anniversary of the epic 'Manas' was celebrated on the international level with the participation of more than 60 countries. A number of exhibitions, festivals, and conferences dedicated to the epic 'Manas' were held in Turkey, China, USA, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus and other countries. The inclusion of *Manas* on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 was the next important step in the recognition of the Epos as World Heritage.

Throughout their historical past the Kyrgyz people led the nomadic way of life which defined the component of its spiritual life almost entirely embodied in the oral epic and lyrical arts. The epic *Manas* became the core of the Kyrgyz epic poetry during that period of history. An epic full

of historical memory absorbing the most important events of the people mainly relating to the struggling for independence and defining its genre is a heroic epic. As is known, the historical formation of the heroic epic took a long period. This formation went gradually, - that is, initially it was a myth, then a fairy tale and finally an archaic epic.

The period of major transformations of the genre form took place between the genre of fairy tale and heroic epic<sup>1</sup>. The main feature and peculiarity of fairy tales is the presence of magic represented by heroes and magical tools. Due to the fact that the tale was formed at the early stages of the development of the human society, the human being felt a total dependence on the forces of the outside world, the other world - deities, spirits, etc.; therefore the hero was weak, dependent and needed assistance. Therefore, heroes with magic and magical qualities became important in the fairy tale.

An epic (an archaic one) appeared in the later period, and it came from fairy-tale stories. In this regard, epic stories are so much common with fairy tales. But, at the same time, the epic represents a new genre. Epics occur during that period, at the stage of the development of the human culture, when man becomes aware of his own capability, and no longer needs the help of magic and supernatural forces. The growing trust in the human abilities has led to the fact that the heroes of this genre are persons with extraordinary qualities, selected, endowed with special qualities that are generalised in the definition of a 'hero', which is not typical of a fairy tale.

But the genre of epic is not homogeneous. It went through various stages of formation in the process of its historical development. S. Neklyudov divides the epic by the time of its appearance and formation into two groups: the archaic epics and heroic ones<sup>2</sup>.

Mythological themes always prevail in the archaic epic, which is rooted

in the fairytale; heroes are endowed with special qualities, but to some extent they depend on external magical powers. *Er Toshtyuk*, *Kojodjash* and *Kokul* are archaic epics in the Kyrgyz folklore. Archaic epics basically have commonality with the oral-poetic heritage of other Turkic peoples, with whom the ancient Kyrgyz people shared common geographical, political and cultural ties during the general history in *Yenisei*, *Altai*.

Heroic epics are products of the folk epic poetry of later times, which can be roughly determined by the actual historical events that are reflected in an art form.

Speaking about the historical background of the composition of the heroic epic, S. Neklyudov notes that heroic epic stories occur in nations that have passed the phase of state consolidation. They give the depiction of historical enemies of the people creating epic, which makes them the reflection of historical wars. In the Kyrgyz epic heritage the heroic epics are the following: *Manas*, *Semetei*, *Seytek*, *Kurmanbek*, *Er Tabyldy* and *Janyl Myrza*.

The heroic historical epic is basically an archaic one. It appeared that the archaic epic has absorbed some historical memories. The epic *Manas* has a long process of development, characterised by the overlapping of later realities with the more ancient ones. In the course of time the bearers of the epic ceased to understand the value of many archaic motifs; however, the ingrained tradition has preserved them for the descendants.

The role and place of the epic *Manas* in the Kyrgyz oral folklore is generally defined as a nationwide epic. Having appeared and developed at the stage of the state consolidation of the Kyrgyz people (8th and 9th centuries), the epic evolution was completed. *Manas* was well known around the people, regardless of the clan they belonged to, was performed everywhere on territory populated by the Kyrgyz ethnos and was perceived as a national identity. Here lies the main difference between 'small epics'

and 'Manas': they were created within one tribe and described storylines connected with one particular race, which made it possible to regard them as tribes.

Its belonging entirely to the Kyrgyz people is the main feature of the epic, which is confirmed by E. Meletinsky, a well-known folklorist: *Manas* belongs exclusively to the Kyrgyz people and its content was determined by the history of the Kyrgyz people<sup>3</sup>.

The epic *Manas* was discovered by Chokan Valikhanov (the great Kazakh scholar, traveller, historian, ethnographer and scout) in 1856, during his expedition to Lake Issyk Kul. Initially he recorded on paper one of the most important episodes of the epic, *Reminiscences of Kokete* as well as historical, ethnographic and philological assessment of the *Essays of Jungaria*<sup>4</sup>. After Ch. Valikhanov, Vasily Radlov (Friedrich Wilhelm), a Russian scientist of the German origin, travelled to Issyk-Kul in 1862, where he recorded the main episodes of the epic as well as *Er Toshtyuk* in the Chu Valley in 1869. The text of the epic was published by him in Cyrillic transcription in the work *Examples of folk literature of Turkic peoples*<sup>5</sup>. He was the first who translated the epic into a foreign (German) language and published it in Berlin.

V. Radlov highly appreciated the poetic structure of the epic and noted the richness of its content and integrity of the epic as a uniform epopee. The scientist was able to find the development of the Kyrgyz folklore unaffected by the external civilisation: 'These songs clearly prove that the folk poetry of the Kara-Kyrgyz people belong to some period, which can be referred to as 'the truly epic period'. This period coincides with the classical Greek period, when the Greek epic song about the Trojan War had not yet been recorded, but lived in the real form of folk poetry in the oral traditions'<sup>6</sup>. He gave special importance to the figures of storytellers,

their improvisatory art. V. Radlov was the first to raise the issue about the recording of the epic on the paper.

Thus, Ch. Valikhanov and V. Radlov are the initiators of contemporary studies on *Manas* and of systematic recording of the epic.

Regular systematic work on the recording of the oral folklore of the Kyrgyz people started in 1922, during the Soviet time. At that very time the Manuscript Fund of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic was established. From 1922 to 1926, Ybyray Abdurahmanov and Kayym Miftakov (folklorists) carried out complete recording of the epic *Manas* (part I) from Sagymbay Orozbekov, one of the last great storytellers of the 20th century. The scientists could not record the second and third parts (*Semetei* and *Seytek*) of the epic due to the latter's illness and death in 1930. The full version of the epic was recorded at different times from the other great storyteller Sayakbay Karalaev by the scientists of the Academy of Sciences. At the present time 35 versions of the epic *Manas*, *Semetei*, *Seytek* are kept in the Manuscript Collections of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic, which have been recorded from various narrators in the following years.

The structure of the epic *Manas* is a complex conglomerate of episodes, which are united by one storyline and the main character, Manas. Speaking about the structure of the epic, Ch. Valikhanov made an important conclusion: *Manas* is an encyclopedic collection of all Kyrgyz myths, fairy tales, legends, belonging to the same time and grouped around a single person, hero Manas. It is like a steppe Iliad. This great epic covers information about the lifestyle, traditions, customs, geography, religious and medical knowledge, as well as the international relations of the Kyrgyz people<sup>7</sup>.

Being a trilogy (as most of epics are), the epic is based on the principle

of genealogical cyclisation. Narration about several generations of heroes - *Manas*, his son *Semetei* and his grandson *Seytek* - is the main character of the story development. Sayakbai Karala uluu expanded the legend by adding a story about *Kenen*, the son of *Seytek*, and then his descendants *Alymsyrak* and *Kulansyrak*. Narrator Jusup Mamai, who lived in China, recorded the narration about seven generations of *Manas*. But the ternary structure remains the most stable form of a traditional epic.

Despite the wide range of versions, *Manas*, *Semetei*, *Seytek* is a single work. This is confirmed by the unity of the plot, themes and images. The artwork is sealed by uniform ideological orientation. Various versions have similar artistic wordings which have a traditional and stable nature. The idea about the main story components of epic narration, which include the core event that composes the pivot of the epic story, was already shaped among the people.

The latest researches of the epic - linguists, historians, ethnographers and folklorists - have proved the idea of Ch. Valikhanov about the encyclopedic character of the epic, revealing in it the following information on ethnography and state system of the Kyrgyz people:

- 2,000 personal names (in the version by Sagymbay Orozbakuulu);
- 6,000 terms relating to horse breeding and animal husbandry;
- 150 terms relating to the state system, starting from the Hun terms till the terms from the late 19th to 20th centuries;
- 180 zoonyms;
- 300 everyday life terms;
- 500 tokens of military ranks.

These data show the scale of the image space of the epic, which is preserved and passed only in oral. Therefore, the storytellers are very important in the preservation and development of the epic, who

were referred to as *jomokchu* during the *truly epic period* and *manaschi* (*semeteychi*) in the Soviet times. The strongest of them developed the epic by adding their own episodes to the traditional composition, thereby combining the performance, reproduction and development of the legend in their works. The role of storytellers was so great that the people kept the names of the most significant of them in their memories. R. Z. *Kydyrbaeva*, who studied the epic, writes: ‘... the last (19th) century informed us about the names of the narrators of *Manas*: Keldybek, Akylbek, Nazar, Tynybek, Balyk, Diykanbay, Suranchi, Chonbasha, Teltay, Kalmyrza, Donuzbay, Zhandak, Choodon’<sup>8</sup>. Sagymbay Orozbakuulu, Sayakbai Karala uluu, Shapak Yrysmendi uluu, Togolok Moldo, Bagys Sazan uluu, Moldobasan Musulmanku luulu, Ybyrayim Abdyrakman uluu, Mambet Chokmoruulu, Akmat Yrysmende uluu, Shaabay Aziz uluu were the successors of the tradition in the 20th century.

The nature of the storytelling in the epic *Manas* is explained in the same manner by *manaschi*, one of such statements having been recorded by V. Radlov: ‘I can sing any song, because the God endowed me with the art of singing. The Lord puts words in my lips and I do not look for the words; I did not learn any songs, all lyrics flow out of me’<sup>9</sup>. As we see, storytellers hold that they do not learn the text of the legend, it being given to them from the God, referring to sacred forces that manage them. These forces come to them when Ayan (prophetic dream, vision) instructed them clearly to spread the epic *Manas* among the people. Disobedience led to serious problems, such as diseases, infertility and even death. Today’s storytellers also confirm this, many of them having come to the epic through illness.

Many researchers have tried to give explanation to this phenomenon. The most convincing justification is found in the papers of prominent folklorist H. *Korogly*, who believes that shamans stood at the beginning of the oral epic

tradition, confirming that the initial purpose of folklore was associated with certain rituals or sacred functions. The scientist explains that ‘...the Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uzbek people have understood the word (*baksi, bakshi*) as a ‘sorcerer’, ‘magician’, ‘folk healer’, ‘magical songs’ and cast out the evil spirit by playing the *dutar*.

Therefore, in the past, the Turkic people attributed magic power to the art of the singer and the profession of the narrator of epic songs was associated with the repertoire of folk ritual songs. .... When shamanism was supplanted by Islam and the shaman as a cult priest gave place to the *mullah, bakhshi* had only attributes of shamanism: music and singing’<sup>10</sup>. These words by H. Korogly are confirmed by the fact that some *manaschi* (Keldibek) was proved to possess the gift of healing art; moreover, in the past the performance of the epic was often practised in the house of an ill person, which helped his recovery. Thus, it seems that there is a connection between the storytelling art and sacred forces patronising *manaschi*.

According to R. Z. Kydyrbaeva, the storytelling art of *manaschi* is a combination of the stability of the oral tradition and improvisation as an integral part of the tradition<sup>11</sup>. The conservative expression (Perri-Lord theory<sup>12</sup>) does not allow the epic change totally. There are formulas, a required poetic model. Such models are common for the epic poetics and usually *manaschi* performs them almost without change; here is an example:

Urunarga too tappay, I cannot find the mountains to measure my strength,  
Urusharga joo tappay, I cannot find the place to fight,  
Chaynaryna tash tappay, I cannot find the stones to grind with my teeth,  
Yzøryne bash tappay ..., I cannot find heads to tear them off...

This formula is used almost unchanged in the basic version of the epic *Manas* which shows how strong the tradition of storytelling is. The formulas become so established (polished) in the period of the epic development, which transferred in the final form to the new tale of another narrator. Besides the formula phrases, *manaschi* also observes the traditions of transferring of key episodes of the epic, its characters, conditions and toponymy. On the other hand, improvisation becomes an integral part of the storytelling, without which it would have been impossible for the epic to develop. Improvisation led to the inclusion of new episodes, alternation of the names of certain characters (minor characters, for example *Kojodjash - Shypshiydar*, *Kuttumergen - Kuttubiy*). The names of the main characters are preserved strictly unchanged in all versions related to the traditionality of the epic.

The abovementioned facts make it clear that the tale art of *manaschi* is a complex syncretic allegation, composed not only of assertions about selectivity of a storyteller, endowed by the God, but also of the inclusion of an artistic talent consisting in great mastership in words, rhythm and artistry.

As for the content of the epic, we should note the complexity of the comprehensive study of all available records of *Manas* because of its spaciousness and multiplicity of versions. Nevertheless, the researchers of *Manas* made a great contribution to this sphere. So, E. Meletinsky defined succinctly the main idea of the epic: 'Manas is not the eradicator of the 'evil' in the world like *Geser*, but is a person that united the Kyrgyz people. Uniting the Kyrgyz tribes *Manas* fights against the feudal separatism of their relatives, and as a conqueror - with the conquered khans'<sup>13</sup>. He points to one significant aspect in the activity of *Manas*: for the sake of uniting people he had to fight against a foreign enemy, overcome resistance of the chieftains of the tribes, who did not want to create such a union, and struggle against the

envy of his relatives wishing to take his place.

The struggle against *vassal khans*, restoration of coalition created by Manas, which was subsequently destroyed by his relatives, became the leading subjects in the second and third parts of the trilogy - *Semetei* and *Seytek*.

Studying the motifs in the epic, we conclude that 'Manas' has absorbed a large number of ancient motifs, which brings it to the epic works of *the Oghuz*, the Turkic people. In this sense, the epic proves that folklore in general, and epic in particular, is a cosmopolitan phenomenon. For example, the motifs of childlessness, finding a bride, battle with a one-eyed giant, which is widespread in the world epic, were revealed in 'Manas'. These motifs draw us to the archaic past. Many archaic motifs were blurred by subsequent modernisation of the story, but their primary meaning remains the same (for example, marriage to *Kanykei*, fighting with giants - *ayar, balban*). But in light of the heroic genre, the heroic theme stands in first place in 'Manas'. *Manas* struggled with real enemies, *the Kalmaks*, who existed in real history, whereas his sworn brother, Almambet, who had the same strength as *Manas*, fought against mythical creatures. In this way, *Manas* passes this archaic function to his sworn brother, leaving for himself the opportunity of struggling with a real enemy. Such separation of functions is interesting indeed, because it shows clearly two separate directions, - that is, archaic and heroic epics.

The archaic direction, despite the glorification of the plot, as well as the subsequent Islamisation, plays an important role in *Manas*. In his oath he swore before the battle, Manas used the following formula phrase, which refers us to the era of the ancient religion of Tengris:

May the earth punish me,  
May the bottomless sky punish me.

Manas is always accompanied by animals in his campaigns, mainly by mythological ones: bird *Alpkarakush* (Semurg), the representative of the upper world, lions and tigers, members of the middle world, and *Ajdaar* (dragon), the representative of the lower world.

The ethnographic descriptions of the ancient lifestyle of the Kyrgyz people, when they lived on the banks of the Yenisei, occupy an important place in the epic. Thus, an interesting description of funeral rites is given in *Khan Koketey's* will. *Koketey Khan* asks to remove the flesh from his dead body with a sharp dagger and wash the bones with koumiss. Here is mentioned the ancient rite of the Kyrgyz: the bones of the dead were buried, the value of which is preserved in the language (*söök köyu*).

The epic as the product of folk art has always been a flexible and mobile system in the process of its development, which incorporated new realities with the advent of new eras and the manifestation of the important events in the life of the ethnos. These new realities were incorporated in the epic naturally, and the resulting transformations did not have an effect on the integrity of its structure. The coexistence of ancient and modern military weapons, such as bows with arrows and cannons or rifles, was not a problem for listeners. The rifles replace the ancient weapon - the bow and arrows - and become a full symbol of war and weaponry in the later period. This does not contradict the nature of the epic, as the principal meaning of the murder weapon is not lost, but simply transferred to the new item.

Summarising the review of the epic *Manas*, we should note that the trilogy is a phenomenon of national identity, which continues to be a major spiritual heritage of the Kyrgyz people. Besides, the ideological component should not prevail over scientific approaches to the studying of one of the greatest heritages of oral traditions, but should identify all the new trends, both in the textual and comparative study of the nature of the epic.

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