



The Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*

Selections translated, introduced and annotated
by

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The following sections have been translated:



The version of *Manas* translated here is that of the famous *manaschi* Saiakbai Karalaev. For a short video of him reciting from the epic, click on his photograph.



For a brief video clip of one of the most prominent living *mansaschis*, Urkash Mambetaliev, click on his photo.

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INTRODUCTION

The monumental epic *Manas* is the most treasured expression of the national heritage of the Kyrgyz people. Composed and sung entirely in oral form by various singers throughout the centuries, *Manas* is regarded as the epitome of oral creativity. Although as yet not widely known, for want of adequate translations, *Manas* is considered to be one of the greatest examples of epic poetry, whose importance is not inferior to that of the Homeric epic. As nomads, the Kyrgyz had no written language. However, they excelled in oral composition, which they artistically employed in their traditional poetry and epic songs. As the internationally renowned Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov notes: "If other peoples/nations displayed their past culture and history in written literature, sculpture, architecture, theatre and art, the Kyrgyz people expressed their worldview, pride and dignity, battles and their hope for the future in epic genre." [2]

Upon gaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz people, led by their first president, Askar Akaev, chose to enter the world's cultural arena through their epic *Manas*. In summer of 1995, with the support of UNESCO, the Kyrgyz celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the epic. The new government of independent Kyrgyzstan used this grand occasion to introduce Kyrgyz history and culture to the world community. Leaders, dignitaries, and scholars of many foreign countries, including the United States, were invited to the *Manas* celebrations, which lasted for five days. In the northern mountainous region of Talas, which is believed to be the homeland of the legendary hero Manas, Kyrgyz proudly presented their ancient nomadic history and culture to their guests by mounting a grand open-air theatrical show displaying the main scenes from the epic. It was the first and remains the largest national celebration that has taken place in Kyrgyzstan since its independence. The celebration was also a symbolic memorial feast and tribute offered to the hero Manas by his people. [3] Click here to view videoclips of the [restoration](#) of what is termed the tomb of Manas at Talas, and the [pilgrimages](#) made to this shrine.

The Epic *Manas*

Today there are about sixty versions of the epic *Manas* recorded from various epic singers and oral poets. Its longest version, consisting of half a million (500553) poetic lines, was written down from one of the last master-*manaschi* (singers of *Manas*) Saiakbai Karalaev (1894-1971). The epic is indeed unique in its size. It is twenty times longer than the Homeric epics *Iliad* (15693) and *Odyssey* (12110) taken together and two and a half times the length of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. [4]

Although we, the Kyrgyz, naively boast that our *Manas* is the longest epic in the world, the world knows very little or nothing about our epic. This is largely the result of the seventy years of Soviet totalitarian rule, which simultaneously preserved national cultures (albeit in distorted fashion) and denigrated its

non-Russian nationalities' cultural and historical heritage. Among other things, the heroic epics of the non-Russian peoples were a potential threat to the Soviet/Communist system, because they glorified their past and carried powerful messages that could stir up or awaken people's pride in their national identity, history, and culture. As with many other non-Russian heroic epics, the epic *Manas* was also condemned as being "bourgeois-nationalist" and "religious" in its content. All the epic's texts published during the Soviet period were the combination of various versions, which were heavily edited to suit the Soviet and Communist ideology.

The epic *Manas* should not only be recognized for its vast size, but it should equally be valued for its exceptionally poetic language and rich content. The German scholar Wilhelm Radloff, who collected Kyrgyz oral literature in the nineteenth century, noted: "It is clear that the [Kyrgyz] people, who very much enjoy an eloquent language, consider a rhythmic speech as the highest art in the world. And therefore, the traditional poetry was developed to the highest level among the Kyrgyz ..." [5] Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865), the nineteenth-century Kazakh ethnographer who recorded one of the major episodes of *Manas* in the İsik-Köl area, said the following about *Manas*: "*Manas* is an encyclopedic collection of all Kyrgyz myths, folktales, legends brought together in time and centered around the hero *Manas*." [6] A well-known Kyrgyz scholar of *Manas* studies, Roza Kidirbaeva elaborated on Valikhanov's thought: "The epic *Manas* is not only the history of the Kyrgyz people, it is a true epic drama which widely reflects all the aspects of their life: i.e., their ethnic composition, economy, traditions and customs, morals and values, aesthetics, codes of behavior, their relationship with their surroundings and nature, their religious worldview, their knowledge about astronomy and geography, and artistic oral poetry and language." [7]

For many decades the Homeric epics have dominated the field of epic studies, leaving little space for research on other oral epics that are still being sung, especially in Central Asia, Egypt, Iran, and India. The Central Asian Turkic oral epics occupy a significant place in world's epic tradition. They exist in large numbers and contain almost all the elements of classical or traditional oral epic songs, many still not known in western scholarship. This ignorance of Turkic epic is due to the lack of translations into western languages, most importantly into English. Western scholars lack the knowledge of the relevant languages to do comparative research. The Russian scholar A. N. Veselovskii suggested that in order to understand the classical epos of the Greeks and the epic songs of the Germanic peoples of the Middle Ages which are only available in written form one needs to study the living epic traditions such as, e.g., the epic songs of the Kirghiz which are being performed even today. [8] Whereas it is no longer possible to find in Germany a singer of the *Nibelungenlied* in Greece a performer of the *Odyssey*, one can easily find singers of epic songs among the Kyrgyz people today.

The epic *Manas* is a trilogy, "a biographical cycle of three generations of heroes, i.e., *Manas*, his son *Semetei* and grandson *Seitek*." [9] The plot of the *Manas* trilogy consists of the following main episodes:

I. In *Manas*

- Birth of *Manas* and his childhood;
- His first heroic deeds;
- His marriage to *Kanikei*;
- His military campaign against Beijing;
- Death of *Manas*, destruction of his achievements.

II. In *Semetei*

- *Kanikei* takes *Semetei* and flees to Bukhara;
- *Semetei*'s childhood and his heroic deeds;
- *Semetei*'s return to Talas;
- *Semetei*'s marriage to *Aichürök*;
- *Semetei*'s battle against *Kongurbai*;
- *Semetei*'s death or mysterious disappearance;

III. In *Seitek*

- Destruction of *Semetei*'s family; Capture of *Aichürök* and *Külchoro*;
- *Seitek*'s growing up in *Kiiaz*'s palace;
- Fighting against the internal enemies;
- *Seitek*'s marriage;
- His defeat of the external enemies and death. [10]

The nomadic Kyrgyz historically experienced many wars and battles with Kalmyks, Manchus, and Kitai (Chinese), who were their traditional enemies. In difficult times when they were defeated by their enemies and exiled to far away lands, as it is the case in *Manas*, people longed for an ideal hero or "baatir" to reunite and protect them. In traditional Kyrgyz epic songs, the main hero should not die. [11] If he dies, he leaves an heir behind to protect his people. In many heroic epic songs of Central Asia, the parents of the hero are usually old and without children. In the beginning of *Manas*, Jakip, father of Manas, very much laments the fact that he is getting old and he has no son to inherit his livestock, protect and lead his people. Therefore, upon Manas' death, his son Semetei continues his legacy, and when Semetei dies, his heir Seitek is born to protect his people. The epic *Manas* does not end, however, with *Seitek*. As many scholars put it, *Manas* is truly an oceanic epic. In the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China (Eastern Turkestan), one of the great living *manashcis*, Jusup Mamai, recites the epic *Manas* up to the seventeenth generation.

The Hero Manas

Thus Manas is one of those legendary or ideal heroes who fights against external enemies and reunites all his scattered people. Hence one of the fixed epithets in the epic describing him as "Chachilgandī jīinagan, chabilgandī kuragan (He united those who went astray and put together those who were divided).

Manas is not considered a historical personality. However, some scholars claim Manas as a prototype of Chingiz Khan. The great thirteenth-century Mongolian epic, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, tells about the origin and history of the Mongols and builds the stories around the life of Chingiz Khan and his empire. One of the episodes in *The Secret History* contains a traditional theme of a heroic epic song, the birth of Chingiz Khan: "At the moment when he was born, he was born holding in his right hand a clot of blood the size of a knuckle bone..."

A similar theme exists in the epic *Manas*. The hero Manas is also born with a clot of blood in his hand. The wise man Akbaltai brings the happy news to Manas' father Jakip and describes Manas' birth to him:

When your Manas came out [from the womb]
He landed straight on his feet!
In his right hand, khan Manas
Came out holding a clot of black blood . . .

However, this unusual birth of the hero is common in Turkic and Mongol epic songs.

Another interesting theme which the two epics share is a dream motif. In *The Secret History*, Chingiz Khan's future father-in-law, Dei Sechen, sees a dream and tells it to Yesügin and his son Chingiz when they come in search of a bride: "This is thy son, he is a son with fire in his eyes, with light in his face. *Quda* Yesügei, I, this night, dreamed a dream. A white gerfalcon, holding both sun and moon, flew hither and is lighted into my hand." [12] Before his son Manas is born, Jakip also sees a special dream which is similar to Dei Sechen's dream about Chingiz Khan.

In my last night's dream,
I settled down on the upper Ala-Too
And caught a young baarchin eagle.
When I took him hunting,
The sound of his flapping wings was heard,
Unable to withstand his wrath,
All the animals fell over in fright. [13]

. . .

Reaching with my right hand,
I grasped the sun for myself.
Reaching with my left hand,
I caught the moon for myself.
My right hand held the sun,
My left hand held the moon,
I took the sun

And put it in place of the moon,
I took the moon
And put it in place of the sun.
Together with the sun and moon,
I flew high into the sky.[14]

These dreams foretell the arrival or birth of a future hero who will take over the entire world. Both *Manas* and *The Secret History* are heroic sagas glorifying the khan Manas and Chingiz Khan and their mighty power. "Genghis Khan personified for the Mongols the ideal ruler-strict, but just and generous. The Mongol nation, as Marco Polo attests, followed him blindly and revered him 'almost as god.'" [15] Another interesting factor to be mentioned is that Chingiz Khan, who is usually known in world history as a "terrible world conqueror," is described from the perspective of the Mongols themselves who show great sympathy and admiration to their leader. He is portrayed as a great, just, and powerful man who is destined to be the khan and conquer the world. The idea that he is protected by "powerful Heaven and Mother Earth" seems to justify his destroying other nations. This notion can clearly be perceived in the epic during Chingiz Khan's military campaigns against the Karluks, Uighurs, Oirats, Kyrgyz and Tanguts who surrender to the Great Khan without any resistance, offering their daughters to him as wives and presenting white falcons, white geldings and black sables as a sign of submission.

As in the case of Chingiz Khan, khan Manas is also likened to the "image of mythic gods." [16] The following excerpts are part of the fixed traditional descriptions of Manas in the epic:

He is created from the beam between the Sky and the Earth,
He is created from the waves of a river under the moon,
He is created from the blend of gold and silver. [17]

Manas is not an ordinary man, but a hero of tremendous power and wrath. When filled with rage, his eyes turn red like fire and he desires to drink human blood. He is destined to conquer the world even before he is born. In addition, Manas is always accompanied and protected by the spirits of powerful animals such as a black-striped tiger. A lion is by his side, a giant black bird flies above him, and a dragon in front of him. Traditionally, Turkic epic heroes, like the Mongolian heroes, were lonely. They fought with ogres or giants alone. When a hero was alone, he had to have some supernatural powers to defeat the enemy. In *Manas* we still see the traits of that ancient theme. Physical descriptions of Manas reflect the supernatural image of the ancient hero.

Although some of the main stories in the epic deal with recent history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there are many archaic elements and themes in the epic, which reflect its ancient origin. As time passed, the "primitive" plot as well as the archaic language of the epic went through many poetic transformations adapting to the new historical, socio-economic and religious developments of each century or decade. We find both ancient and recent poetical elements, e.g., in hero Manas' description. For example, as traditional epithets, Manas has *kabilan*, "tiger," *arstan*, "lion," *kökjal*, "blue-maned," *kankor*, "bloodthirsty," etc., which reflect the ancient "totemic" religious worldview of the Kyrgyz. The new generations of epic singers added new characteristics to the hero according to their own personal knowledge and poetic innovations. Those supernatural descriptions of Manas' personality were renewed. For example, the nineteenth-century epic singers who lived during the peak of Islamic/Sufi influence among the nomadic Kyrgyz, made the hero Manas a "pious Muslim" who fought against the infidels. Saiakbai Karalaev had all the ancestors of Manas be blessed by Allah, The Prophet Muhammad, and Sufi saints.

The religious world of *Manas*

From the opening lines of the epic *Manas* we see the presence of Islam, especially Sufism, in Kyrgyz nomadic culture. The singer begins by describing Manas' ancestors and associates their greatness and merit with Sufi holy men.

His forefathers were all khans,
Blessed by *Kid'ir* from the beginning,
His ancestors were all khans,

Blessed by *Kidir* from the beginning.
In places where they had stayed overnight
Sacred shrines were built, for
God had blessed them from the beginning.
In the places where they had passed by
A city with a bazaar was established, for
God had blessed them from the beginning.
They had exchanged greetings with twenty Sufi masters,
Learned writing from a caliph,
And they thus were called great "sahibs." [18]

The Central Asian nomads and nomadic empires did not exist in isolation. They interacted with other neighboring sedentary states and cultures such as Chinese, Persian, and Russian. As a result of their direct and indirect economic and political interactions with the sedentary world, they borrowed and adapted many of their socio-cultural and religious values. When in various historical periods the nomadic Turks, including the Kyrgyz, adopted Islam, their religious worldview, now wrongly called "shamanism," was heavily influenced by the new Islamic faith. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Islam, particularly its Sufi branch, spread widely among the Central Asian nomads. Along with Islamic and Sufi ideas, beliefs and practices, many Arabic and Persian religious terms and expressions were incorporated into the Turkic languages, including Kyrgyz. The original meaning of many of those religious terms and ideas, however, was lost or altered during their incorporation into the nomadic Kyrgyz culture.

The role of Islam among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs has always been a controversial topic in western scholarship. Thomas Allsen maintains that the Central Asian Turkic and Mongol nomads possess rich nomadic cultures with their own "cosmological precepts, aesthetic norms, and system of moral and economic values. And it was these indigenous worldviews and tastes that provided their criteria for borrowing when they encountered and surveyed the cultural riches of the sedentary world." [19] Allsen explores how nomadic Mongol rulers made use of the cultural and economic resources of the sedentary subjects and argues, "nomads did not borrow randomly, but selectively by filtering new, external elements through their own cultural norms and aspirations." [20] He compares this "selective borrowing" to a psychological mechanism known as "reidentification." That is, "whenever individuals or cultures encounter a new phenomenon, there is a pronounced tendency to place it into an established category, that is identify the new with something already familiar from experience." [21] This concept of "reidentification" offers the best means to understand the history and nature of Islam/Sufism in nomadic Kyrgyz society. Kyrgyz Islam has never been the same Islam practiced in other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, etc.

Today new scholarly findings show that the *communal* and *ancestral* aspects which make *life* possible form the "distinctive" and central focus of Inner Asian religious life. [22] The Kyrgyz people honor the spirits of their ancestors for they believe in those spirits' strong power to bring misfortune to an individual, family or community, if they are not remembered, respected, and offered special food accompanied by a recitation from The Quran. In Sagimbai Orozbekov's version of *Manas*, for example, old Jakip, father of Manas, visits *amazar*, a sacred place, usually the tomb of a Sufi saint, and asks for a child. Both in Saiakbai Karalaev's and Sagimbai Orozbekov's versions, Jakip's wife advises him to offer a feast to the people, including the poor, orphans and widows, by slaughtering many livestock.

In other words, as Devin DeWeese asserts, "the ancestral spirits are the a central focus of the most common and most sacred religious practice among Inner Asian peoples." [23] In particular, the Sufi concept of "saint" or "saint worship" nicely fits into the existing cult of ancestor of the nomadic Turks. However, it is important to note that institutionalized Sufism, i.e., *wali* and *tariqa* complexes involving a strong devotion of disciples to Sufi masters, which are found in other parts of the Muslim world, do not exist among the Turkic nomads. [24] In contrast, the Sufi order of Naqshbandiyya, founded in the fourteenth century in Bukhara, was quite popular in pre-Soviet Uzbek urban life.

Another important factor which must have made Sufism attractive to the Kyrgyz nomadic culture was music. As we know, music is important in Sufism. The nomadic Kyrgyz also had a great respect and love for music, songs, wisdom poetry and epic songs. The native oral poets and singers were the ones who spread the new religious ideas and knowledge of Sufism through their improvised wisdom poetry. Under Sufi influence, a new generation of Kyrgyz oral poets emerged. This group of eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century oral poets, called "zamanachi akindar" ("Poets of Time") by Kyrgyz scholars, sang about changing times. Much of this poetry refers to the Russian colonial period in the nineteenth century. Although most of these poets were literate in Arabic, they composed their songs orally in traditional Kyrgyz poetic structure, i.e., keeping the 7-8 syllables in each verse line, following alliteration and end rhyme, and accompanying themselves on the *komuz* (the Kyrgyz three-stringed "guitar"). Their poetry dealt with Sufi religious ideas as well as Kyrgyz philosophical concepts and ideas about this world and the next world, about Nature, the sun, water, trees, youth and old age.

We know very little about the actual spread of Sufism among the nomadic Kyrgyz. However, from the presence of many Sufi religious terms and ideas in the Kyrgyz language, especially in *Manas*, we can say that Sufism was better received by the nomadic Kyrgyz than was traditional orthodox Islam. One of the war cries or prayers which the hero Manas and his Kyrgyz people use is "Baabedin," or Bahauddin Naqshbandi, the founder of the fourteenth-century Sufi order *Naqshbandiyya* which was popular in Central Asia. Most of the key Sufi terms found in *Manas* are still actively used in Kyrgyz but have lost their original meanings. The Kyrgyz, however, pronounce these words according to their own linguistic characteristics: *sufi*=*sopu*; *awliya*'=*oluya* (protégé of God who possesses some supernatural power); caliph=*kalpa/kaliypa*; *nafs*=*napis* (personal ego); *pir*=*pir* (Sufi master); *darvish*=*derbish* (wandering Sufi dervish), *iman*=*iman*; *ahwal*=*aqibal* (mystical state in Sufi practice).

The presence of Islam and Sufism in *Manas* does not, in any way undermine the significance of the Kyrgyz native or pre-Islamic religious worldview. It exists side-by-side with Islamic/Sufi ideas and beliefs. We find many un-Islamic religious practices and beliefs such as taboos, traditional blessings or incantations, burial customs, and healing with animal bones. Since the Kyrgyz and Mongols share similar nomadic culture and way of life, we find analogous religious beliefs and practices in the two societies reflected in *The Secret History of the Mongols* (=SH) and in *Manas*. Although the Mongols were tolerant towards other religions and often converted to Christianity and Islam, they kept their "shamanistic" beliefs and traditions. The language of the SH is rich in proverbs and sayings, metaphors and parallelism, prayers and incantations that inform us of the ancient "shamanistic" worldview of the Mongol people. Their *kams*, i.e. shamans, played an important role in the society. They identified which days were favorable or not favorable for carrying out certain business. The SH mentions that Chingiz Khan himself, before going on a campaign, always read the portents in a burnt shoulder blade to determine its prospect for success. In the genealogy of Mongol khans and the history of the Mongol Empire written by the Muslim statesman and historian Rashid Al-Din, we read about *jaychis*. Rashid Al-Din writes that during the conquest of the Khitayans, Tolui khan, brother of Ögedei khan, orders his *jaychis* to practice rain magic, which causes strong blizzards and wind, snow and heavy rain in the middle of summer. It starts raining not on the side of the Mongols, but on the side of the Khitayan's army:

... the Khitayans, because of the excessive cold, were like a flock of sheep with their heads tucked into one another's tails, their clothes being all shrunk and their weapons frozen. He ordered the kettledrum to be beaten and the whole army to don cloaks of beaten felt and to mount horse ... And the Mongols fell upon the Khitayans like lions attacking a herd of deer and slew the greater part of that army, whilst some were scattered and perished in the mountains. [25]

Similar descriptions are found in *Manas*. We read a lot about Kara Kalmyks, Manchus and Kitay *ayars* (soothsayers) and fortunetellers who use their magical powers during battles. Like the Mongols, the nomadic Kyrgyz also believed in the power of *jaychis* who use a special rock called *jay tash* to cause severe rain storms in order to defeat their enemy. *Manas* also uses the *jay tash* during one of his battles with the Kalmyks.

Historical significance

The nomadic Kyrgyz did not leave written accounts about themselves. We mostly read about the history and culture of Central Asian nomads from historical travel accounts written by their sedentary neighbors such as Persians, Chinese, Russians, and Europeans. As representatives of the sedentary world and culture, authors of those written accounts could not fully understand the essence of the lifestyle and worldview of nomads and looked down on them. Central Asian Turkic and Mongolian nomads were portrayed as "wild," uncivilized" and "brutal" people who aimlessly roamed on the steppes and mountains with their livestock. During the seventy years of Communist rule, the Soviets made the Central Asian nomads sedentary and brainwashed them by telling them that their past lifestyle was uncivilized and

backward. For the Soviets, the history of the Kyrgyz, like other Central Asian peoples, began from the 1917 "Great" October Revolution, and the history before that period did not exist. The Kyrgyz had to take pride not in their past nomadic culture and history, but had to be grateful for their "great older brother," the Russians, for bringing them "the light of civilization." As a result, many Kyrgyz developed low self-esteem and a "slave mentality." The legacy of the Soviet propaganda education still exists among those people who lived most of their lives during the Soviet period.

Since independence, however, there is great interest in the Kyrgyz nomadic past and history both among scholars and the young generation. Today, the younger generation of Kyrgyz is growing up speaking more Kyrgyz and learning about both their pre-Soviet and Soviet history and culture. Since the *Manas* celebrations in 1995, the teaching of the epic *Manas* has become important in schools and higher institutions. Schoolchildren learn about the "seven wisdoms or testaments" in *Manas* which have been held up by President Akaev as national ideology.

Despite the fact that the epic *Manas* is not considered a "historical" poem in traditional sense, it contains a significant amount of historical and socio-cultural information not only about the Kyrgyz, but about their nomadic and sedentary neighbors, tribes, states, and empires with whom they had historically interacted. For example, in the first eight episodes of *Manas* presented here, we learn a great deal about the religious beliefs and practices of Kitay, Kalmyks, and Manchus as well as about their military clothes, arms, and strategy.

The rich interweaving of socio-cultural and historical realities in *Manas* makes it difficult to divide the events of the epic into various historical periods. Hence, as Kyrgyz scholars note, "Manas is the resonance of the ancient and the reflection of the recent times." [26] Some of the motifs and themes as well as the human characters in the epic seem to have been established already in the Old Turkic period, i.e., the fifth-eighth centuries CE and reflect religious beliefs and customs of that time. [27] As the well-known scholar of Central Asian epic studies, Zhirmunskii, noted: "The plot of the epic *Manas* was finalized during the Kalmyk invasion [of Central Asian Turkic peoples] in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." Therefore, "the Kalmyks appear as traditional enemies not only in Kyrgyz epics, but in Uzbek, Kazak and Karakalpak epics as well." [28]

Geography of *Manas*

The geography covered in *Manas* is so vast that it was necessary to have a special entry in the *Manas Encyclopedia*, "Geography of *Manas*." The epic encompasses the entire Eurasian continent extending throughout Inner Asia and from The Caucasus to The Crimea and all the way to the Japanese islands. [29] The names of Tibet, The Himalaya, India, and Mecca, and names of north-western African countries are also to be found. The core geographical areas in *Manas* are, however, the territories of Kazakhstan, The Altay Mountains, China, Innermost Asia, and Eastern Turkestan. [30] The *Manas* recorded from Saginbai Orozbekov contains 532 geographical place names and 113 names of ethnic groups, most of which existed in history. The epic singers were knowledgeable about geological occurrences and changes on the Earth. They tell about such natural phenomena in *Manas*:

The mountains fell apart, turning into ravines,
Ravines shook, turning into mountains.
Many seas became extinct
Leaving only their names behind.
Every fifty years, people were new,
Every hundred years the earth was renewed.

In other words, they "confirm the philosophical axiom" that nothing in the world is static; "everything is in constant change and movement." [31] The singers not only mention these places, but describe in some detail the flora and fauna in the landscape.

Recording of *Manas*

The first historical reference to *Manas* is in the fifteenth-century manuscript "Madjmu at-Tawarikh" (A Collection of Stories) written by a Tajik Saif ad-din, the son of Aksikan Shah-Abbas. [32] According to the

Kyrgyz scholar Samar Musaev, in this manuscript the author tries to use the hero Manas and the epic's main episodes to praise Muslim sheikhs. This fact tells us that *Manas* was popular at that time. [33] The recording of Kyrgyz oral literature began in the second half of the nineteenth century with the Kazakh ethnographer Chokan Valikhanov who traveled among the Isik-Köl Kyrgyz in 1850's and was continued by German scholar Wilhelm Radloff who visited them in 1860s. These two men recorded some of the main episodes of *Manas* and published them in Russian and German. In 1903, as part of the scholarly expeditions carried out by the members of the Russian Geographical Society, several Russian scholars came to the Kyrgyz, recorded some episodes from the *Manas* trilogy and published their translation in Russian prose. The massive recording of all the genres of oral literature, especially epic songs, dates from the early 1920s when the new Soviet government began promoting national languages and cultures of non-Russian nationalities. During the Soviet period, the recording of Kyrgyz oral literature began with the epic *Manas* sung by one of the last master epic singers, Sagımbai Orozbek uulu (d. 1930) as well as from other well-known singers and oral poets. The recording of the longest version of *Manas* sung by Saiakbai Karalaev began in 1936 and ended a year before his death in 1971. By that time, as the singer noted himself, he had already become old and therefore could no longer recite the epic as well as he used to do when he had his strength and health. However, the original text of his version was never fully published. [34] The editors omitted many repetitions, stories and perceived shortcomings. [35]

Today, as result of the 1995 Manas celebration, Kyrgyz scholars have published academic editions of the epic's original full texts recorded from the last two master-singers, i.e., Sagımbai Orozbekov and Saiakbay Karalaev. Chokan Valikhanov was right in describing Manas as encyclopedia, for the Kyrgyz scholars also published a two-volume "Manas" encyclopedia, a compendium of all the information and materials in and pertaining to the epic.

Manaschis, Singers of Manas



Jusup Mamai



Kaba Atabek-uulu



Sagymbai Orozbekov



Saiakbai Karalev



Seidena Moldoke-kızı



Urkash Mambetaliev

It is not known when and by whom the epic *Manas* was composed originally. People remembered the heroic deeds and kindness of certain historical personalities for a long time and their *jomokchus*, i.e., storytellers or epic singers, developed some of those major historical events into epic songs in which they glorified the life and the deeds of the hero. The singer named İrchı uul, who acts as one of the forty

companions of the hero Manas in some episodes, is remembered among the Kyrgyz. According to a legend, it was İrchı uul who composed the original version or the first lines of *Manas* in the form of a lament, glorifying the heroic deeds of Manas after his death. Later, all the laments were brought together by a legendary singer named Toktogul, who is believed to have lived about 500 years ago and created the epic *Manas* out of those separate songs. [36]

Manas is sung without an accompaniment of any musical instrument both by men and women, but traditionally male singers were more popular because they traveled more than women. Unlike other Kyrgyz epic songs, the epic *Manas* has a unique style of singing. It involves not only singing, but acting as well. The style of the song varies according to the nature of the stories. If the singer sings about a battle, he vividly recreates that scene for his audience. If he describes a tragic scene, e.g., death of a hero, he expresses that by singing laments and crying with actual tears. He does not just recite the epic, but acts it out by speaking the language of each character.

The epic singers were traditionally called *jomokchu* (derived from *jomok*, fairy-tale). The contemporary term *manaschi*, singer of the epic *Manas*, is a new term coined during the Soviet period and it refers only to those who recite *Manas*. Every singer of *Manas* had his own pupil, who learned the epic from the established master-singers. First they learned some episodes and then the main stories by heart. Later, if they possessed the gift of improvisation, they added their own words and innovations. [37]

During the various stages of becoming masters of the epic, *manaschıs* were divided according to their poetic and improvisational skills into three categories: *üyrönchük manashcı* (new learner *manaschi*), *chala manshi* (not a true *manaschi*), *chinigi manaschi* ("true *manaschi*"), and finally *chong manaschi* (great *manaschi*). [38]

Saiakbai Karalaev

Saiakbay Karalaev (1894-1971), who is called the "Homer of the twentieth century," was one of the last "chong manashchıs" from whom the *Manas* trilogy (*Manas*, *Semetei*, and *Seitek*), consisting of half a million poetic lines, was recorded. Saiakbai Karalaev, was born in the İsik-Köl region of northern Kyrgyzstan. His family was poor and they had to work for wealthy Kyrgyz to earn their living. Karalaev began reciting *Manas* when he was about sixteen to seventeen years old. His grandmother played a key role in instilling the "seeds" of *Manas* in her grandson. Karalaev heard the main stories of *Manas* from her. [39]

Well-known or great *manaschıs* like Saiakabai Karalaev usually did not say that they learned *Manas* from someone or previous master-singers. Becoming a great *manaschi* involved some kind of spiritual transformation of the singer who had a vision by seeing a special dream in which he was visited by the hero Manas himself or by other main characters in the epic. Saiakbai Karalaev also connected his singing of *Manas* with a visionary dream. He saw that special dream in his early twenties. His dream is described in the following way: "On his way from Semiz-Bel to Orto-Tokoy, he saw a white yurt in place of an old big black rock. He became very scared from the loud noise that came from the sky and fainted. He then woke up and entered the yurt where he was offered food by Kanıkei, the wife of Manas. When he came out from the yurt he met a man who told that he was happy that they encountered him on their way to Beijing:

Causing a great calamity in the world,
With about forty or fifty *tümön* [40] of army
We are going on a war campaign
To the far away and hazy Beijing.

He then told him: "I am that Bakai who finds the way in the dark and words of wisdom when necessary. I want to give you the *gölazık* [41] of Manas, open your mouth." [42] He then introduced some of the forty companions of Manas. Bakai's putting food in Saiakbai's mouth signifies the idea of receiving the gift of singing from the wise man Bakai.

In the same year in 1916, a big uprising against the Russian Tsar and his colonial rule took place in the whole territory of Central Asia. The uprising among the northern Kyrgyz was the most tragic experience.

Terrified by the brutal oppression of the Russian army, who were sent to suppress the uprising, Saiakbai Karalaev, together with his family and thousands of many of other Kyrgyz people, fled to Kashgar (Kashi). They returned from Kashgar after the 1917 October Revolution and from 1918 until 1922, Saiakbai served in the Soviet Red Army. [43] Like many other young men and women, he was recruited by the new Soviet government to become a local village administrator and spokesman to spread the new Soviet and Communist ideology.

Saiakbai's "career" as a *manashçi* began during the early years of Soviet rule among the Kyrgyz. In mid-1920's he met with two other established manaschis from whom he learned the skills of singing *Manas*. [44] The recording of the first part of the *Manas* trilogy, which began in 1932, was finished in 1937. This process of gathering folklore was part of the Soviet campaign which promoted national language and culture of the non-Russian peoples who experienced the colonial oppression of the "White" Tsar. The first recording of his singing on a tape recorder and videotape was carried out in the 1960's. [45] As the well-known Kyrgyz scholar Bolot Yunusaliev, who had close a relationship with the singer, notes: "The *Manas* trilogy has never been recorded from any other singer than Saiakbai. Therefore, his version is unique and the only one. This is a greatest and priceless gift, which Saiakbai left for his people as well as to all mankind." [46]

Those people, including foreigners, who saw and listened to his recitation of *Manas* were quite moved by his powerful spirit and high artistic singing talent. The Algerian Minister of Culture noted: "You [the Kyrgyz], say that you had no written literature and books. He, this elderly man, is indeed your national library." [47] During his recitation of *Manas*, he made his listeners cry and laugh. Those who listened to his performance described him in the following way: "While he was singing, we not only saw him before us, but pictured the epic's characters as well." [48] Chingiz Aitmatov compared Saiakbai's singing to a symphony orchestra: "Saiakbai was not only an oral poet, but a great artist and composer. Like a symphony orchestra, he varied and changed his voice a thousand times. He moved from tragedy to lyrical songs, from lyrics he moved to drama, then within a short time he burst into tears, then became joyful, then tired, then became energetic again. Sometimes he sounded like a teeming army of soldiers, sometimes he became as calm as a lake, sometimes he became like a fast and strong wind, and rushed like a river." [49]

Notes on the Translation

The epic *Manas* was the first piece of Kyrgyz oral literature to be recorded and translated into other languages. [50] Here I shall comment but briefly on previous English translations of the epic. In 1977, Arthur Hatto, a British scholar of epic studies, translated into English one of the main episodes of *Manas* called "A Memorial Feast for K k t i Khan," which had originally been recorded by Radloff. [51] Even though Hatto used the original Kyrgyz text for his translation, he misunderstood many words, customs, and socio-cultural issues mentioned in the epic. He did not speak Kyrgyz, nor had he lived among the Kyrgyz, and therefore was not able to give the flavor of the original language and provide the socio-cultural context.

The second English translation of *Manas* was done by another British scholar, Walter Mayor. His two-volume translation was published in 1995 in honor of the *Manas* celebrations. Kyrgyz scholars of *Manas*, who do not know English and thus have no means of checking the authenticity or quality of his translation, are very happy about it. Mayor, too, did not know Kyrgyz, and therefore used the Russian translation of the epic. In other words, his translation of *Manas* is a translation of the "beautified" Russian translation. This factor alone undermines the authenticity of his translation. There is no need for further discussions of his translation of *Manas*, for any translated text done from a secondary source is only of secondary value.

By criticizing these two British authors' English translations of *Manas*, I am not claiming that my translation is better in terms of the quality of my English. My English may not sound as poetic and sophisticated as the English of these native speakers who are professional translators. However, a deep understanding of the original text and thus remaining truthful to it should be the most important rule of translation.

Being the first native Kyrgyz scholar to undertake the English translation of *Manas* is a great honor as well as a great responsibility for me. As a non-native speaker of English, however, translating the first

eight episodes of the epic was quite challenging albeit an exciting experience. By translating almost every word and term in each verse line and providing explanations and socio-cultural context for them, I learned a lot from *Manas* about my own people, culture, and history. Also, I would like to mention that, as a representative of the Kyrgyz people and culture described in *Manas*, I felt very proud about the Kyrgyz language and Kyrgyz singers who developed it to its highest degree. At the same time, however, while translating this rich, descriptive, and poetic language of Saiakbai Karalaev, I regretted the fact that I could not reproduce that original poetic and eloquent language in my English translation. *Manas* indeed deserves a much superior, poetic English translation. Like all other Kyrgyz traditional epic songs, each verse line of *Manas* contains 7-8 syllables and maintains alliteration and end rhyme. Therefore, only a great English poet can help us to keep these important poetic features of the epic, and I very much look forward to cooperating with that person in the future.

However, I would like to thank my academic advisor, Professor Daniel Waugh, who took his precious time and read through my translation with me line by line and polished my English.

I have translated the first eight episodes of *Manas* recorded from Saiakbai Karalaev as published in the latest 1995 academic edition, i.e., the full original version which had until then not been published. A popular version of it had been published in four volumes in 1984, but it was heavily edited. The academic or scholarly edition provides interpretations and explanations for many of the archaic terms and expressions which are no longer used in modern Kyrgyz. The academic edition numbers every tenth line; for reference the numbering has been retained here, although in a few cases I have combined lines, which means that the translation may appear to be a line short. Omissions of text have been denoted by bracketed ellipses.

Since my translation is aimed towards a general English speaking audience, not to a scholarly community, I elected to cut some repetitive parts of episodes without losing the main thread of the story. As mentioned earlier, repetitions are one of the important characteristics of oral epic poetry. However, the singer, Karalaev overdoes repetition of certain scenes in the epic. Such repetition may be found, for example, where he describes how the Kyrgyz suffered from the Kara Kalmyks and Manchus when their leader Karakhan died. These frequent and long repetitions of certain scenes tell us that the recording was not carried out in favorable conditions, i.e., in a natural setting with a real audience. When the recording is done manually with a pen and paper in an artificial setting, the singer loses the Muse which inspires him spiritually and thus helps him improvise flawlessly and make smoother transitions from one story to another. Karalaev would not have repeated to that extent had he been singing *Manas* in a natural setting in front of a live audience.

Keeping the same number of syllables in each verse line was impossible in English. I was mainly concerned with conveying the original meaning of the verse lines. There are many old terms, fixed expressions, proverbial sayings and names of objects which are hard to translate into English. Similes, metaphors, fixed epithets, parallelisms and repetitions are important devices in Kyrgyz epic poetry. In addition, it is filled with other genres of Kyrgyz oral literature such as laments, curses, blessings, humor, and examples of fairy tales. In struggling to translate these features I have tried to remain as truthful as possible to the original text. By doing that, I may not have been kind to my English readers who expect a poetic text to sound poetic. But I hope they appreciate my genuine effort to give them the feeling of the language and unique style of *Manas* in which the beauty and richness of the Kyrgyz language is celebrated. After all, the epic *Manas* was not meant to be read, but be recited out loud with the synchronization of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Those who read *Manas* or any other traditional poetry in Kyrgyz will believe that Kyrgyz is truly the language of artistic oral poetry.

Here are some examples from the epic to show the how poetic and difficult to translate the language is. Karalaev often uses the popular Kyrgyz epithet spoken by men "Kizitalak." Through the voice of the Kyrgyz, he curses the Kalmyks as "Kizitalak Kalmyks," i.e., "Kalmyks whose daughter(s) are divorced." Without its cultural context, this expression does not give any sense of cursing in English. The expression is related to Islamic marital issues. In Islamic culture, when the husband wants to divorce his wife, he can proclaim three times the word "talak." When the nomadic Kyrgyz were introduced to that Muslim custom, the idea of being divorced in that manner must have been so demeaning and shameful that they used that expression in the form of a curse or nasty epithet. One whose daughter was divorced lost his pride and respect in a nomadic society in which divorce was almost non-existent. So, I have translated this expression as "good for nothing" which gives that sense of being useless.

The epic also contains several traditional expressions and descriptions related to Kyrgyz women which need a cultural context. Kyrgyz make a clear distinction between married and unmarried women. Traditionally, married women and unmarried girls had different styles of braids and headdress. In *Manas*, [unmarried] young girls are described as "besh kökül," maidens with five [multiple] braids. It is an insult to call an unmarried girl a "woman" in Central Asian culture. Another fixed poetic epithet for beautiful Kyrgyz married women in *Manas* is the following: "Kelengkor chachpak, keng sooru [kelin]," "young married women or brides with *kelengkor chahpak* braids and wide hips." In Kyrgyz culture, women with long braids, a slender waist, and wider hips were considered beautiful. And these features became fixed epithets for women's beauty in poetry.

The following lines describing Jakip provide an example of poetic comparison which strictly follow initial and internal alliteration and parallelism. The content is also very specific to Kyrgyz nomadic culture and thus hard to render in English:

Bölüngön Jakip	From the quail-like eyes
baykushtun	Of poor Jakip, who was
Bödönödöy közünön	torn apart,
Bölöl-bölök jash ketip,	Drops of tears streamed
Karagattay közünön	down,
Kamchī boyu jash	From his black-currant eyes
ketip . . .	Streamed tears the length
	of a whip.

Karalaev's language and vocabulary is very rich in such traditional expressions and metaphors, which infuse his recitation of the entire epic. Animals, birds, and plants are used very often as poetic devices in describing one's feeling or in comparisons.

Another challenge to translating *Manas* is the abundance of terms related to horses. Horses play a significant role in Kyrgyz nomadic culture; therefore they are one of the key animal characters in their epic songs. Horses are considered the wings of a man. The expression or term "janiibar" (one who has a soul) is usually applied to a horse. Nomads raised thousands of horses and trained good stallions to be used during wars as well as for traditional horse games. The horse is the best friend of the hero. In Karalaev's *Manas*, the hero Manas and his horse Taitoru are born on the same day at the same time. In Kyrgyz epics, all horses of heroes have names and some have the ability to speak understand and speak human language. The nomadic Kyrgyz have different names for horses as well as for other animals, according to their age, sex, color, and skill. For example, a foal, both male and female, is called *kulun*, *tai* is a yearling, *baital* is a two-year-old female horse, *kunan* is a three-year-old horse, *bishti* is a four-year-old. After the age of four, the age of the horse is counted by *asii*. *Asii* is age five, which can also be applied to a camel and horned animals such as deer. In addition, there are several terms for a stallion, steed or charger: *buudan*, *tulpar*, *argimak*.