Remembering Manas

The Manas epic takes up a specific position in Central Asian commemoration culture. Unlike the central figures of the cults of Genghis 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.

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: a connection to the past to survive in a social world.

Storytelling and transcendence

In Kyrgyzstan today, many consider the Manas epic to be more than just a tale. Manas narration is surrounded with mystique. Manaschïs 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, Manaschïs will even recite in their sleep, performing a recital that is audible for their fellow sleepers, but will not wake up the Manaschï. 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. Manaschïs are in direct contact with ancestral spirits, thus opening up a connection through which healing energy emanates.

In- and outside Kyrgyzstan, the Manas epic is frequently interpreted through an 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 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 referenced as a Muslim, a Sarï Nogoi 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 calls “the Kyrgyz who never stop to be greedy, who keep begging and drinking and are never full”, or when the narrator tells of how Manas killed all Kyrgyz boys and took the Kyrgyz girls. 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 Saghibai Oranbaev’s mouth, Manas was not doubtlessly an ethnic Kyrgyz, as well as a Muslim. We can thus conclude that before the Soviet nationalities policy was implemented, a sense of Kyrgyzness was connected to the epic, but not as unequivocally as it is today.

ON 27 NOVEMBER 2015, at noon, thirteen Manaschïs (Manaschï) embark on an enormous endeavour: they will narrate the ancient oral epic ‘Manas’ for seven days and seven nights non-stop, until they pick up the storyline where the other has ended. Before they commence, the Manaschïs and the organisers of the event sacrifice a sacrificial animal to the ancestral spirits, hoping that the spirits of the epic characters will guard and protect the Manaschïs during their seven day recital.

Dressed in their finest robes, the Manaschïs sit on a decorated padded plaid at the head of a yurt-shaped building. In a cahedra specific to Manas narration, they recite the deeth of Manas, his suffering, his mistakes, his victories. Hundreds of people wait the event in the Ethno-complex Dosmyz, 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 Manaschïs’ blessings for their work. They bring along livestock to sacrifice or gifts for the narrators and pray with the Manaschïs that are waiting for their turn to narrate.

On the final day of the recital marathon, the sponsor of the event, a traditional drink company, presents the narrators with an expensive laptop computer. Three of the Manaschïs are awarded a gold watch by the prime minister. 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.
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 Osbeks 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 tension, religious antagonism and the threat posed by China. Instead, the principles spoke of 'ethic 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 battles 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 Manaschïs, 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 of the Kyrgyz, as sons of Manas, is a freedom-loving nomadic nation that do not bow to bad leaders was used 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, Manaschas 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 take once again prove to be stronger than those who attempt to harness it for political stability.

References

2. Ibid. Meyer 2015, p.155.