

# MANAS: THE KYRGYZ EPIC



BY  
IRAJ BASHIRI

Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

Copyright 1999, 2020

# **Manas: The Kyrgyz Epic**

**by**

**Iraj Bashiri**

Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

Copyright 1999, 2020

## Introduction

Around the year one thousand of the Common Era, two processes of epic formation took shape in Central Asian literature. The Iranians, under the Samanids of Bukhara (819-999) and the Ghazavids (977-1186) developed an epic rooted in their oral traditions and pre-Islamic historical documents. The epic, called the *Shahname* (book of kings), is written by Abu al-Qasim Firdowsi Tusi (940 -1026). The *Shahname* contains a full account of Iranian cosmology and mythology and a brief account of the historical dynasties that preceded its writing. The main intent of the epic is to provide a literary and cultural account of the identity of the Iranian peoples rather than an exact account of historical events.

Roughly during the same time period, the Turks developed an epic rooted in the heroic deeds of the Kyrgyz tribal lords detailing how, in AD 840, they successfully fought the Uyghurs and destroyed their capital of Bei-tin. The Kyrgyz epic called *Manas* is a compilation of heroic songs created in praise of the hero of the same name. *Manas* comes through as a champion whose actions and attributes resemble those of Genghis Khan.<sup>1</sup> He unites his people, fights the Chinese and the Kalmyks, and triumphs over them.

While the *Shahname* grew out of a civilization struggling to preserve its pre-Islamic identity, *Manas* endeavored to safeguard the Turkic heritage of the Central Asian nomads through oral transmission of the deeds of their heroes. Both attempts were successful. The *Shahname* of Firdowsi, the bedrock of Iranian cultural and national identity, has successfully safeguarded Iranian identity against incredible odds. Similarly, *Manas* has accomplished the triumphant emergence of the Kyrgyz tribes from the bondage of the Uyghurs and the Chinese and continues to buttress Turkish identity, Kyrgyz identity in particular.

Both epics have their own separate histories in medieval times as well as during the last century. They have experienced upheavals that could have cost them their very existence. Yet, they have surmounted those impediments by dint of their conviction and flexibility,<sup>2</sup> and a promise to continue their contribution to their respective societies. The focus of the present study is on the societal aspect of the epic *Manas*. It intends to understand the reasons for the public appeal that the epic garners and the role that it plays in Kyrgyz society.

Many prominent figures have voiced their opinion about *Manas*. Here we shall cite two. The nineteenth-century Kazakh ethnographer Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865), who recorded a major episode of *Manas* near Lake Issyk Kul, described the epic in this way. "*Manas* is an encyclopedic collection of all Kyrgyz myths, folktales, [and] legends brought together in time and centered around the hero *Manas*."<sup>3</sup> As we shall see,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ratchnevsky. *Genghis Khan*, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of the *Shahname*, see Bashiri, *Firdowsi's Shahname* in bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Valikhanov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, p. 258.

Valikhanov's identification of *Manas* as an encyclopedia of Kyrgyz culture is exactly right.

Similarly, internationally renowned Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008)<sup>4</sup> echoed Valikhanov. He said, "Whereas the people of the other regions have safeguarded their culture and history in texts, sculpture, architecture, theatre, and the arts, the Kyrgyz have reflected their worldview, national consciousness, aspiration, and struggle for liberty in their oral traditions."<sup>5</sup> By "oral traditions," of course, he meant *Manas*.

During the time *Manas* was taking shape, the Kyrgyz occupied the Yenisei river valleys, an area quite far from the region that they occupy today. What the actual content of the epic was at that time remains a mystery as, traditionally, the *manaschis* have been reshaping the epic to fit the needs of their time.<sup>6</sup> There is no question, however, that a large portion of the content of the present-day *Manas* reflects the life that existed during those bygone times. That is evident from the archaic words, unknown geographical location names, and exact details of the rituals that are contained in the epic. The sense of pride that fills the Kyrgyz when they listen to the *Manaschi* recite the first part of the trilogy bespeaks the sentiments of a people that enjoy the accounts of the bravery and incredible feats of their truly triumphant heroes.

According to Mukhtar Auezov (1897-1961), a Kazakh and a major contributor to the establishment of *Manas* as a mainstay of the greater Turkic culture, after defeating the Uyghurs, *Manas* united the forty disparate Kyrgyz tribes and led them to the Altay mountains and, from there, to the Alay regions.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as we shall see, it was due to the untiring efforts of Auezov and Aitmatov that *Manas* survived as a part of the cultural heritage of the Turkish people of Central Asia.

During the Soviet era, epics that glorified the national identity of the indigenous peoples of the Union were invariably condemned as "bourgeois-nationalist." Their contents were deemed "religious" and, therefore, harmful to a thorough appreciation of the intent of socialist/communist ideology. This was the case with the *Shahname* as well as with *Manas*, *Alpamysh*, and *Dede Kurkut*. In spite of that, Auezov and Aitmatov cooperated with each other and saved *Manas*. Aitmatov contributed to the revival of the epic by outlining the reasons for revisiting it as a cultural icon, and Auezov provided scholarship with the aid of which to justify that, in essence, *Manas* was neither religious nor nationalistic. They argued correctly that *Manas* belonged to all the Turkic peoples irrespective of their ethnic, socio-economic, political, or geographic affiliations. As an epic, they argued, *Manas* did not recognize temporal or spatial boundaries. Rather, it was a poetic and artistic expression handed down from generation to generation. They identified *Manas* as a contributing factor to the vibrancy of the culture of the Turks at large. Ironically, today, that very cultural icon is the source of pride for the Kyrgyz people of the independent republic of Kyrgyzstan. Without the efforts of those two knowledgeable and brave Turks, in the prevalent anti-nationalist frenzy, like many other epic traditions, *Manas*, too, would have been condemned and destroyed.

---

<sup>4</sup> For Aitmatov's biography, see Bashiri, "Chingiz Aitmatov: Life and Works," in bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Aitmatov, "High Peak," p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Manaschi* is a song performer, a reciter of stories in epics. He should not be confused with *akyn*, an improvising poet and singer. For more information on *manaschis*, see below.

<sup>7</sup> See Van der Heide, *Spirited Performance*, p. 102.

As mentioned, etymologically, the *Manas* epic goes back to the tenth century. As such, thanks to the selfless contributions of countless *manaschis*, who have retained the archaic forms, today *Manas* serves as the cornerstone for the reconstruction of the nomadic life and culture of the Kyrgyz. The efforts of Auezov and Aitmatov, mentioned above, were supported by a host of other authors including S. Musaev, K. Rakhmatullin, A. Bernshtam, to name a few.<sup>8</sup>

The Altay Kyrgyz finally ended their migration when they reached the Alay mountains and the Ferghana valley. In order to coexist with the inhabitants of the towns of Andijan,<sup>9</sup> Samarqand, and Bukhara, they married into the noble families of the region and created lasting bonds that sustained them against such enemies as the infidel Kalmyks who were apprehensive of the growing power of the Kyrgyz.

Although there are mentions of the epic *Manas* in the literature as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was not until 1885 that the oral narrative was reduced to writing, especially when Vasily Vasilievich Radlov a.k.a. Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff (1837-1918), the well-known Russian Turkologist, published his Russian translation of *Manas* in Saint Petersburg. Radlov's version consists of the main stories in the epic, especially those dealing with the birth of the hero, his marriage, the funeral repast for Koketei Khan, and the hero's death.<sup>10</sup>

Today, there are about sixty different recorded narrations of *Manas*. The length of the poem, more than half a million *bayts*, makes it one of the longest epic narrations in the world. *Manas* is twenty times longer than the ancient Greek epic poems *Iliad* (15693) and *Odyssey* (12110) combined, and two and a half times the length of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.<sup>11</sup>

After the fall of the Soviet Union (1991), each of the former Soviet republics introduced themselves to the world through the past achievements of their peoples. The Tajiks, for instance, celebrated the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Shahname*, the bedrock of Iranian national identity, in 1994.<sup>12</sup> The Kyrgyz celebrated the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic *Manas*. In both cases dignitaries, scholars, and prominent political figures, local and international, were invited to the celebrations.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the 1995 *Manas* celebration, two academic editions of the original full recordings of *Manas* recited by Sagimbai Orozbekov and Saiakbay Karalaev now exist, the last two master *manaschis*. There is also a two-volume *Manas* encyclopedia, based on Chokan Valikhanov's recognition of the epic as an "encyclopedia of Kyrgyz culture"<sup>14</sup>

## The Culture of Manas

Kyrgyz written culture does not have a long history. Kyrgyz oral tradition, however, is lengthy, profound, and informative. It includes the conceptual frame of Kyrgyz thought

---

<sup>8</sup> For details, see, Musaev, pp. 277-279.

<sup>9</sup> For a long time, Andijan, Namangan, and Kokand formed the nucleus of a highly civilized society in the Ferghana Valley. The Kyrgyz occupied the Alay region including the Alay mountains and their off-shoots.

<sup>10</sup> Musaev, 1995, p. 276; Rakhmatullin, 1995, pp. 294-95; for information on Koketei Khan, see below.

<sup>11</sup> S. Musaev. *Epos Manas*, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> See Bashiri, *Firdowsi's Shahname*, pp. 24-159.

<sup>13</sup> For more details, see Arik, "1000th Anniversary of *Manas*," 1995-1996.

<sup>14</sup> Kochumkulkizi, "The Kyrgyz Epic," see bibliography.

which encompasses Kyrgyz social mores, Shamanism versus Buddhism and Islam, Kyrgyz national consciousness, and the struggle of the Kyrgyz people for independence.<sup>15</sup> Among the songs and stories that establish Kyrgyz oral heritage, first place is usually awarded to *Manas*, a poetic account of the literature, culture, and art of the Kyrgyz people. The genesis of the epic is usually attributed to one of Manas's forty warriors who was blessed with poetic talent and other unusual capabilities. After him, his fellow *manaschis* continued the tradition and refined the practice. As mentioned, whether AD 840 should be recognized as the beginning date for this epical performance remains to be seen. After all, it takes centuries before concrete acts morph into mythic episodes that would be worthy of transmission from generation to generation.

*Manas* is a trilogy consisting of three parts. The first part called "Manas" deals with the birth, childhood, heroic deeds, marriage, military campaign against Beijing, and the death of the founder of Kyrgyz national identity. The second part called "Semetei," is the story of Manas's son and successor, Semetei, who continues Manas's efforts to gain the Kyrgyz their independence. "Semetei" deals with the flight of Manas's wife, Kanikei, to Bukhara, taking Semetei with her; the childhood and heroic deeds of Semetei; Semetei's return to Talas;<sup>16</sup> his marriage and battle against Kongurbai; and the young warrior's disappearance or death. The third part is called "Seitek." It is the story of Semetei's son, who brings the efforts of his grandfather and father into fruition. The third part deals with the destruction of Semetei's family, capture of Aichurok and Kulchoro, Seitek's confinement in Kiiiaz's palace, his battles against internal enemies, marriage, defeat of the external enemies, and death. Although all three parts are fully developed, reference to *Manas* is usually reference to the first part of the trilogy.

The story line of *Manas* is quite simple. At the age of fifteen, when nomad boys normally choose a job such as shepherding the khan's cattle, Manas forms a band of like-minded youth and teaches them the ways of war. To keep his supporters united and happy, he prepares feasts and entertains them by organizing games for them. The lambs that provide food for the feasts are snatched from the flock of Oshpur, a shepherd who serves as Manas's mentor.

After many bloody encounters with the Kalmyks in which Manas shows his mettle, the young warrior is elected as the leader of his tribe. As such, with the help of his father and his own forty companions-at-arms, he organizes the movement of the Kyrgyz from the shores of the Yenisei to the Altay mountains and, subsequently, from there to the Alay region. During this same time period, he marries Kanikei, the daughter of the ruler of Bukhara. The marriage proves fruitful for both Manas and the people of the region. It is fruitful for Manas because Kanikei actively participates in Manas's struggle for independence. The marriage is fruitful for the people because it puts an end to the feuds brewing among the settled and nomadic inhabitants of the Ferghana valley and the Altay highlands.

Births, circumcisions, weddings, raids, and funeral feasts constitute major building blocks in both family formation and personal recognition among the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. The feast held on any of those occasions is scrutinized by the community;

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf., Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire*, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> The Talas region, through which the Talas river moves from present-day Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan, is deemed to be the birth place of Manas. It is also the location of the Battle of Talas, a decisive battle, in AD 751, between the Chinese and the forces of Islam.

merit is awarded only if the effort of the host surpasses the expectation of the participants. Thus the popularity of an individual among his tribal peers depends on the number of people who participate in the funeral feast that he holds for a dear departed. Still more valuable is the hardship that various chiefs willingly undertake to mobilize their subjects to participate in the funeral feast. Other indicators of importance are the type of games that are included in the plan, the value of the prizes awarded at the end of each game, and the number of horses, camels, and sheep that are slaughtered for the occasion.

One such repast was given after the death of Koketei Khan. For three years, Koketei Khan's son, Bokmurun, and Manas worked on the logistics of the repast. Kyrgyz tribes from all over the region were commanded to participate in the feast. Bokmurun made sure personally that everyone contributed generously to the success of the feast. To his delight, the organization and execution of the funeral repast was successful, thanks to Manas who kept tribal squabbles, a main disruptive element in such gatherings, at a minimum (see below).

When arranging his force for battle, Manas followed a particular routine. He assembled the Kyrgyz tribes, organized and empowered them. Then he assured them that victory was theirs. More importantly, he emphasized that, after the battle, the Kyrgyz will own all the cattle belonging to the enemy and they can be driven to the *yurtas* of the Kyrgyz.<sup>17</sup> These exercises made the outcome of every battle obvious from the start. They created a rich culture of resistance with the aid of which Manas triumphed in his major battle against the Chinese and the Kalmyks, a victory unprecedented in Central Asian annals.

### **The *Manaschi* and His Audience**

Before *Manas* was committed to writing, there were as many versions of it as there were reciters or *manaschis*. Over the centuries, each *manaschi* has interacted with his audience and created his own version of the epic tailored for that audience. Put differently, although all *manaschis* deliver the same basic information, they do not shy away from incorporating new ideas, or changing their narrative (see the story of Almambet below). For instance, it is not unusual to encounter episodes in *Manas* in which the hero is involved in the politics of Imperial Russia, or a character is carrying a musket.

Among the many versions of the epic, however, two versions stand out: the version by Sagymbai Orozbekov (1867-1930) and that by Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971). Of the two, Orozbekov's narration is deemed superior, especially with respect to the first part of the trilogy.

Reciting *Manas* needs special talents. More than that, it requires personal inspiration rooted in nomadic tradition, as well as in Islam, or better yet in both. Without one of these well-springs, the *manaschi* cannot motivate himself to invest the extremely exhausting amount of energy required for the recreation of the repetitive, albeit

---

<sup>17</sup> *Yurt* or *yurta* is a portable, round tent, covered with skins or felt. It is comfortable and can be used as dwelling all year round.



necessary, verses outlining the deeds, wealth, character, and motivation of the many colorful characters that populate the epic.



Sagymbai Orozbekov  
1867-1930

Sagymbai Orozbekov's career as a *manaschi* begins with a prophetic dream when he is fifteen years of age. In this dream, Semetei, Manas's son, inspires the *akyn* to become a *manaschi* or epic reciter. For the next forty years, under the tutelage of teachers, such as Chonbash, and his own brother, Alisher, Orozbekov perfects his mastery of the songs that constitute the epic. Then, before his health begins to interfere with his ability to perform, he allows his version to be recorded. The recording is carried out first by K. Miftakov (1922) and later by I. Abdyrakhmanov (1926). This version consists of only the first part of the trilogy. Orozbekov's mastery for the narration of "Semetei," too, was unquestionable, but that part was not recorded.

The most complete version of the epic trilogy is created by Sayakbai Karalaev. It consists of some 500,000 verses for which Karalaev draws on all his own resources, including what he had learned from his first teacher of *Manas*, his grandmother, and from his teacher of many years, Choyuke Omurov. To those personal experiences, of course, we must add the prompting of his audiences between 1935 and 1947, the time during which this version was prepared.

Finally, as mentioned, it is imperative that we understand the role of the audience in the performance of the Kyrgyz epic; an understanding that is not essential, for example, in dealing with the *Shahname* of Firdowsi. The audience for the *Shahname*, whether kings and princes, or the nobility, or the common people of towns and villages, is not allowed to influence the text in any way. Neither is the person who recites the verses of the *Shahname* allowed to change a word of the text. For this reason, while there are many editions of the *Shahname*, there is basically one version. Any discussion of editions of the *Shahname* is confined to areas such as types of illustrations, calligraphy, addition and deletion of total stories, suggestions for different reading, or readings, of words, and the like. The substance of the epic (i.e., the social, political, and ideological concerns of the Iranian people since the ascension of their first king, Kayomars, to the throne of Iran) has remained a constant.

The process of updating the Kyrgyz epic, on the other hand, even though safeguarded in essence, is at the mercy of the audience and the *manaschi*. Imagine, what a wealth of information could be available for the incorporation of Islam into Kyrgyz culture, for instance, if every now and then *manaschis* had recorded their own versions of Manas! An indication of that kind of information is available in the story of Almambet, reported by two different reciters (see below).



Sayakbai Karalaev  
1894-1971



## The Role of Islam in the Epic

It is not possible to know the exact time of the introduction of Islam into Kyrgyz culture. It is possible, however, to evaluate the Islamization process, bearing in mind that Kyrgyz Islam is not the same as the Islam of Arabia or Iran. The Muslims who introduced the Islamic faith to the Kyrgyz were primarily *sart* Tajik merchants belonging to the Naqshbandiyyah *Sufi* order.<sup>18</sup> As traders, they sold their wares to the Kyrgyz and, as Muslims, they taught the tribes people about their faith. Their teaching of Islam, however, was inadequate. Rather than teaching the fundamentals of the *Shari'a*, they focused on *Sufi* customs and rituals—popular features of the religion that were attractive to the infidels, especially to the warrior caste.

It is important to note that these self-appointed, pioneer “missionaries,” were steadfast in achieving their goal; they exercised an admirable degree of tolerance. Even when ridiculed, it seems, they persisted as long as some affected Kyrgyz remained attentive to their teachings. Consider, for instance, the following reaction by Kyrgyz observers to the performance of communal Muslim prayers:

All of you standing in a line,  
Did something unusual,  
Now all of you stood with your hands on your knees,  
Now all of you stood with your hands on your stomachs,  
What absurd thing you did:  
With your head touching the ground  
You stood in several lines,--  
What kind of play is it?  
You looked left and right,--  
What good does it do?  
You started mumbling  
Words unintelligible for us.  
Having muttered something,  
What have you all seen?<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, rituals alone were not sufficient to sustain the interest of the Kyrgyz to the faith, especially the attention of the warrior class. The Muslim merchants, therefore, devised other ways to support their stories—some of these supplements were from within the Islamic tradition, such as the words and deeds of the Prophet and his companions, and some, like music, were tangentially related. Music was acceptable to both the *Sufi* teachers and the Kyrgyz tribes people. This is how the instruction proceeded. The session started with singing religious songs, moved into performance of rituals, and ended in telling pointed stories. The Kyrgyz who used music for entertainment at the personal, family, and community levels enjoyed the gatherings, liked the lively rituals, and were

---

<sup>18</sup> The etymology of the word “*sart*” and the ethnicity of *sarts* are both open to question. The term is first mentioned in relation to town dweller merchants, Tajik or Uyghur, during the Seljuq and Mongol eras. It differentiated the tribal people of Central Asia from the settled Muslim populations. In later centuries, these merchants traveled between Kashghar and China on the Silk Road, carrying merchandize and *Sufi* ideology. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *sarts* were identified as Uyghurs and settled Tajiks. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *sarts* were identified as a group of Uzbeks related to the Kongrats. Europeans refer to Uzbeks with the term “*sart*.” In the epic, there is a name Uyghur Sart.

<sup>19</sup> Auezov, translated in Aliev et.al., 1995, p. 399.

entertained by the stories into which the rituals gradually morphed. They also felt they could vaguely identify with some of the characters like *Khizir* (see below).

The stories, it should be noted, were novel and entertaining. For instance, they talked about Resurrection Day and its relation to afterlife, especially heaven and hell. They explained, in detail, what action Azrael, the angel of death, took upon learning about the impending death of an individual. At the time of death, they were told that Azrael, accompanied by two companions (Nakir and Munkar), visits the moribund individual, pierces the breast with a poisonous spear, and separates the soul from the body. Then, depending on the good or evil deeds of the individual on the earth plane, Azrael takes the soul to heaven or hell. This graphic portrayal of the consequence of one's actions on the earth plane remained with the participant and guided his deeds from then on.

Often the propagators of the faith went so far as to graft quasi-Islamic attributes to the body of the already existing Kyrgyz oral traditions. The story of Almambet is a case in point. Almambet was a Chinese so devoted to Islam, and the promotion of the Islamic faith, that he preferred being expelled from his father's palace rather than give up his Muslim values. The attributes of fictional Almambet are then grafted into the portrayal of a beloved Kyrgyz hero like Manas. Here are some of the points that Manas and Almambet share. They are both born late to rich, elderly fathers, especially after the latter's many earnest pleas to the Almighty. They both have eventful childhoods, and both attain high degrees of military success. Even their names are suggested by Islamic figures, a dervish in the case of Manas and a Muslim saint in the case of Almambet.

The Kyrgyz culture, however, holds the two individuals on the two ends of a spectrum. Almambet, a Chinese, has an inborn proclivity to promote Islam. China, as a source of national pride does not have any attraction for him. Manas, on the other hand, is a Shamanist converted to Islam. He has a penchant for creating a Kyrgyz nation, a socio-political entity that is not supported by Islam. In fact, as an ideology, Islam rejects all social, political, and national barriers.

Furthermore, Manas's own life reflects some features that are usually attributed to the prophet Muhammad and the Islamic saints. From the time that he is born, he is repeatedly assisted by angels who, in various disguises, appear to him. His name consists of the first letters in the words "Muhammad" and "Nabi" (apostle).<sup>20</sup> As a child, he has a vision of the holy forty spirits (*Chilten*) that protect and assist Muslim warriors in battle. The *Chilten*, it should be added, can appear and disappear at will. In Manas's case, in time of need, the *Chilten* appear as ferocious animals, hover around and above him, and assist him kill the enemies of the faith. They also give him advice, help heal his wounds, and assure him of a long life. At the end, they die with him. Following the example of the *Chilten*, Manas, while still a teenager forms his own forty companions-in-arms and they assisted him throughout his life. Finally, upon his acceptance of Islam, Manas is given a special sword as well as access to the blessings of *Khizir*.<sup>21</sup>

There is a wealth of information on Islam and the cultures of the Silk Road in general that cannot be covered here. Suffice it to say that the fusion that emerged from the rich

---

<sup>20</sup> See below for further explanation.

<sup>21</sup> *Khizir* is a holy Islamic figure in a green cloak riding a white horse. He has found immortality in the Fountain of Youth, assists lost travelers and down-trodden people to whom he appears in the guise of someone they know, and identified by his thumb that is missing a bone.

nomadic culture of the Turks, the sedentary Iranian culture of the Tajiks, and the desert culture of the Arab invaders who brought Islam to Turkistan, was a unique phenomenon. It contributed to the creation of an Islamic civilization in Central Asia the likes of which had not been seen since the days of the pharaohs of Egypt, the Greco-Roman emperors, and the great king of kings of Persia. However, the echoes of those grand days can be detected. They were heard at Takht-i Jamshid, in 1971, during the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the foundation of the Persian empire; the celebration of the *Shahname* of Firdowsi, in Dushanbe, in 1994; and in the Manas Epos Millennium Celebrations in the Talas/Bishkek region of Kyrgyzstan, in 1995.

### Manas's Early Life

Living near the Chinese border, nomadic Kyrgyz tribes were routinely raided by their civilized neighbor. At the time of the rulership of Khan Alo-oke, however, the Kyrgyz elders, headed by Khan Nogai, felt strong enough to challenge Chinese overlordship and put an end to Chinese aggression. But although their intentions were honorable, their calculations were flawed. The Chinese defeated the army fielded by the Kyrgyz Council of Elders and trouble-makers (Nogai, Shigai, and Chidi) were arrested. Furthermore, to prevent any future aggression by the Kyrgyz, Nogai's four sons—Orozdu, Usen, Bai, and Jakib—were exiled to distant lands.<sup>22</sup>

Jakib, who was exiled to the Altai region of Turkistan, married Shakan, his brother's widow, as well as Bakdeelet, the daughter of Chakan. But neither Chiyirdi<sup>23</sup> nor Bakdeelet bore him a son. This situation affected Jakib who, as a youth, had attributed his childlessness to the will of the Almighty:

What can one do? God decrees it so!  
Such is then my predestined fate.  
Now already I'm forty-eight.  
Riches of all kinds I've gathered here.  
If I go to that other world there,  
Gold and silver I'll leave behind.  
My wife herself a widow will find.  
Who will inherit the flocks one leaves?  
From the Altai will come cattle-thieves!<sup>24</sup>

But now, in his old age, Jakib fervently desired the presence of a son to enjoy the wealth he had amassed; more importantly, he wished to have a son to continue his line. Night and day, therefore, he cried and pleaded to the Almighty for a son:

---

<sup>22</sup> The genealogy of Nogai is as follows. Kara-Khan was succeeded by Oguz-Khan who, in turn, was succeeded by Baigur and Ugur. Baigur's son, Babir-Khan, was succeeded by Tyubei who, in turn, was succeeded by Kegei. Nogai, Shigai, and Chidir were the sons of Kegei.

<sup>23</sup> Marrying the wife of a deceased close relative was a common practice among the nomads of Central Asia. The practice known as *levirate* protected the genealogy line of the tribe as well as the memory of the deceased as often the new wife, in this case Shakan, gave up her original name and went by the name of her deceased husband, in this case Chiyirdi.

<sup>24</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 12.

"Lacking successors, I'll soon be dead.  
Lacking a hoof, how live?" he said.  
Lonely, old, and still with no son,  
Who then will hear my lonely groan?  
Day and night no peace I've known.  
With much care, I rich have grown.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, Jakib's prayers were answered. He himself, Chiyirdi, and Bakdeelet had separate dreams<sup>26</sup> with the same symbolic portent: the arrival of a glorious son. Following the dreams, the fifty-year-old Chiyirdi became pregnant:

Two whole years away had passed  
Since the conception of bold Manas.  
Three whole months had rolled on by,  
Then Chiyirdi began to sigh  
Wanted something unusual to eat  
Usual food didn't wish to meet.  
Didn't want even to look at such.  
Didn't want sugar or honey much.  
One thing alone desired for her part,  
"I'd like to taste a tiger's heart!"  
Nothing else Chiyirdi desired!<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the Khan of China, Esen, heard about the possible birth of a boy called Manas among the Kyrgyz of the Altai. According to his soothsayers, this infant would become a mortal danger to China. The Chinese Khan, therefore, ordered all Altai newborns called Manas to be killed. Unable to find Manas—the child is still not born—the Chinese officials imprisoned Yar-Manas, the son of the ruler of Samarqand.

A few years after the prophetic dreams of Jakib and his wives, Manas was born to Jakib's senior wife, Chiyirdi. The birth, resembling the birth of a dragon or a tiger, was difficult and unusual:

Waters of birth flowed forth 'neath stress,  
Then came a child's resounding screech.  
Butting from the belly's breach,  
Bearing blood in both his hands,  
There on the carpet at last he lands!<sup>28</sup>

Khan Jakib, who was staying clear of the birth *yurta*, was informed by his old friend Akbulta about the birth of his son. After he overcame his joy, Jakib Khan rewarded Akbulta generously and ordered him to prepare the tribe for a sumptuous feast to celebrate the birth of his son, Chon-Jindi:<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Dreams that come true, as a motif, appear in many Central Asian stories, such as in the life story of Genghis Khan in *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

<sup>27</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> To offset the spies of the Chinese Khan, the name of the infant was concealed. While the family knew him as Manas, to the world he was introduced as Chon-Jindi.

Bey Jakib, when these words were said  
Smiled, then kindly shook his head:  
"If it's like that, Balta," said he.  
Take this purse of pure gold from me!  
Take all the colts for warriors saved,  
Take all the mares with manes all waved,  
Which for sacrifice I have long kept,  
When in misfortune many have wept.  
Three hundred steeds you will find in the fold.  
Kambarboz is seven years old.  
From his herd your choice you may make,  
Nine fine stallions from him may take,  
From the camels then take four.  
Cows, sheep and goats, four nines—not more..."<sup>30</sup>

After a remarkable celebration to announce the birth, the time came to choose a name for the child. For this, Jakib assembled all the influential members of the tribe. They studied the tribe's genealogy but could not suggest a name that befitted the infant Chon-Jindi. The infant was like a dragon, a tiger, and a man-child all rolled in one. At about the same time, a Dervish appeared from nowhere, saw the assembly, and asked about the substance of their deliberation. Once he learned that they had been unable to find a suitable name for the child, he suggested the name "Manas." He explained the reasons for his choice in the following:

"If you'll allow me to make so free,  
I shall utter a God-given name!"  
Thus did the Dervish to them exclaim.  
All the people began to shout:  
"Give us the name then, spit it out!"  
"At its beginning stands letter "M",  
As in Muhammed's most blessed name!  
In the middle stands letter "N",  
That means "Nabi"--prophetic men.  
Then at its end stands the letter "S",  
That is the tail of a lion, no less!"<sup>31</sup>

As the child advanced in age, he became increasingly mischievous and unruly. His singular behavior disturbed old Jakib a great deal. Distressed by Manas's acts, in consultation with Chiyirdi, he took the boy to a shepherd called Oshpur to educate. But Oshpur, too, found Manas to be beyond help. Every day, Manas invited his playmates to a feast for which he killed off several of the old shepherd's lambs. What continuously angered the shepherd, however, was Manas's delight in watching him look for his pipe that he had hidden. Eventually Oshpur, too, gave up. He asked Jakib to come and take his wayward son home:

---

<sup>30</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 78. Note that in Arabic, the short vowel "a" is not written. Hence the written form of the name in Arabic transcription is MaNaS.

"How is he getting on, your son?"  
He replied, "He is full of fun!  
Does whatever he wishes, you see--  
Doesn't take any notice of me!  
Of your one sheep I must take care--  
But I can't keep him, I must declare!  
If I let him go on in this way,  
All our lambs, for sure, he slay!  
You must come and take him back,  
Or of slain sheep there will be no lack!..."<sup>32</sup>

When Jakib arrived at Oshpur's hut to pick up Manas, a band of Kalmyks appeared from nowhere and beat up the old shepherd. When they saw Jakib, they beat him up as well. Becoming irate, and to protect his father, the boy killed the leader of the Kalmyks and dispersed his men who took to their heels.

The boy's prowess was superhuman. Having been visited by Aikojo, a messenger from Prophet Muhammad, he was not only blessed with an understanding of Islam but, he was also awarded with a special sword and spear. Seeing his son's extraordinary powers in many battles and at such an early age, Jakib nominated Manas for the leadership of the tribe. The elders accepted to support Manas as long as Jakib ruled alongside him. The Elders wished to see the father and son together lead the Kyrgyz forces against the infidel Kalmyks and the oppressive Chinese:

"...'Well,' you say, 'be our khan with your son!'  
That would not do for anyone!  
If you have true respect for me,  
Let Manas your real Khan be!"  
So said bey Jakib, and wept.  
Down his face the tear-drops swept.  
Knowing still their scorn for tears,  
Bey Jakib the tossing fears.  
Weeping from weakness and from age,  
How he longs to leave the stage!  
Now Kirghiz and Kazakhs, they too,  
Now Kalmaks and Manguls, a few,  
On the blanket of soft white felt  
Sat Jakib, where the others knelt.  
Bogatir Manas, his son,  
Set beside him: when that was done,  
Then they gripped the blanket fast,  
Tossed them up in the air at last!  
When they had taken seven steps,  
"Enough my lads!" cried Jakib and wept,  
So Jakib stepped down on the ground,  
Then in the blanket alone was found  
Lion Manas, who nothing feared."<sup>33</sup>

In this way, Manas, still in his teens, became the leader of his people. He was properly raised on the traditional blanket made of white felt and crowned with a wreath

---

<sup>32</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 1, p. 255; *bogatir* (same as *batyr*) is an honorific term meaning hero.



made of bronze. Ninety mares were slaughtered in his honor and a nine-day celebration was held under the auspices of the sky-blue banner of Jakib, old Nogai's forebear.

### **The Story of Almambet**

The story of Almambet deals with the relationship between the Islamic Empire in the West and the Chinese Empire in the East. Almambet plays a crucial dual role in connecting the *dar al-Islam* (abode of peace) of its time with the *dar al-harb* (abode of war). The story shows how warriors were recruited to serve Islam and how their military capabilities were used to open up lands that otherwise would have remained beyond the reach of the Muslim armies.

Due to the dual role explained above, in their narration of *Manas*, different *manaschis* emphasized different aspects of the Almambet story. For instance, the life story that Karalaev has presented for Almambet, is very different from that presented by Orozbekov. According to Karalaev, Aziz-Khan, whose sixty wives had failed in bearing him a son, asked Kara-Khan, the emperor of China, to choose a wife for him. Aziz-Khan thought that the emperor, by using his magic stone, could determine which bride would be able to bear a son. Kara-Khan, however, referred the matter to his sorcerers who advised Aziz-Khan to marry Altinai, Sooronduk's daughter.

Altinai, who had already been impregnated by the holy beam three months prior to the time of the wedding, kept the pregnancy a secret from her husband. Even when the child was born, for the first three months, she sent him to her father, Sooronduk. Only after three months, Almambet was introduced to his father. Upon learning about his son, Aziz-Khan held a sumptuous feast and asked Kara-Khan for assistance in giving the newly born a name.

Kara-Khan, however, did not like the child. In an attempt to drown the child, he threw the child into a well of ice-cold water. He then explained his unusual action as a test of the child's potential for becoming an invincible champion. The child, however, shielded by a Muslim angel, survived. Furthermore, a Muslim saint appeared at the feast and provided the group that was seeking a name for the child with the Muslim name of Almambet.

Almambet was an extraordinary child. He began his studies at the age of six and completed them by the age of ten. By age twelve, he was an accomplished master in the art of magic, surpassing all his teachers. As an accomplished master then, he approached Esen-Khan, the ruler of Beijing, and asked him for the governorship of a major province of China. Esen-Khan refused the request. He also rejected Almambet's request for his daughter's hand in marriage. Esen-Khan's daughter, who harbored Muslim sentiments, learned about her father's plan for eliminating Almambet. To ward off the danger, she advises Almambet to seek Manas, the leader of the Kyrgyz, and join him.

Almambet's search for Manas brought him to Khan Kokcho, the leader of the Kazakhs. He stayed with Khan-Kokcho for six years, helping him reduce his enemies and amass a great deal of wealth. In time, however, Almambet was accused of having an affair with the Khan's wife, Akerkech. Before the Khan's sinister plan for eliminating him saw the light, Almambet, advised by Akerkech, left the land of the Kazakhs and continued his search for Manas. His wanderings took him to Bukhara, where he met

Bakai and Kanikei. From Bukhara he traveled to Arabia and visited Mecca. Upon his return from Mecca, in Central Asia, he met Manas and became one of his forty warriors.

According to Orozbekov, however, Almambet was born to the family of the Chinese Khan Sooronduk. Like Jakib, Manas's father, Sooronduk, remained childless throughout his life. Then, during his old age, in response to his fervent prayers, he was blessed with a son who, at the advice of *Khizir*, was called Almambet. The child proved to be intelligent and inquisitive. Even when still in the womb, he spoke and refused to enter the world. Only after the angel Gabriel, through his mother's mouth, breathed the name of the Prophet of Islam on him did he allow himself to be born. He entered the world with the word "Muhammad" on his tongue. In later life, too, he was merciful and impartial. For example, he abolished the Chinese tradition of execution of provincial prisoners to welcome high governmental officials, as well as the practice of killing young girls and boys to prepare remedies against old age.

Although both versions were influenced by Islam, the two stories conveyed different emphases. Orozbekov's version followed the epic blue print that had been established by the early Kyrgyz *akins* (i.e., the hero's birth to an old couple after years of childlessness, the unusual character of the hero as a child, and the hero's military potential and capabilities). Karalaev's version stressed the Islamic theme of seeking knowledge summarized in the words of the Prophet: "*utlib al-ilm va lau bis-sin*" (seek knowledge even if it is in China). Put differently, the Orozbekov version resembled the life history of Manas, the Karalaev story was replete with themes from *The Arabian Nights* (cf., the actions of Almambet's mother and Almambet's slave).

### **Manas Marries Kanikei**

At the age of thirty, after winning many battles and bringing down a number of tribal chiefs, Manas settled down with two women: Karaberk and Akalai. Almambet, Manas's friend, did not approve of his friend's wives:

"Comrade! Act in a thoughtful way!  
I'm a mere wanderer, let me say,  
Now it seems that you, as they tell,  
At this time are unwed as well!  
Karaberk and Akalai  
You count as wives--but the well's run dry.  
Thanks to your kindness, they stay unknown  
Thanks to your valour, you've left them alone!  
Both Karaberk and Akalai  
As your wives you count, forby.  
Yet, if you I truly see,  
Surely a bachelor you must be?"<sup>34</sup>

Prompted by Almambet, Manas asked his father, Jakib, to find him a bride. He argued that the women he lived with had come to him as war prizes rather than as wives. Manas told Jakib that, as a father, he had not been attentive to the needs of his son and that he had not found his son a bride. Conversely, his son had shored up his father's power, helped him amass a fortune, and had safeguarded that fortune:

---

<sup>34</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 82-83.

"Father, I shielded your aging head,  
Your protector I'm used to be,  
But you seem to know nothing of me!  
Father Jakib! What's happened to you?  
Find me a wife and marry me too--  
That's your duty, my dear man!  
Karaberk, daughter of Kayip-dang,  
Now in my embraces lies...  
Three hundred braves she had, what's more,  
And she battled against me sore.  
But she fell in my hands at last!...  
After we left behind Altai,  
After we came then to Alai,  
We were again engaged in strife,  
Fighting, striving for our life.  
Then Kalch, from Kara-Tegin,  
And the Kara-Tadzhiks did begin  
To attack us, and felt my ire,  
On the Tash-Koton steppe under fire...  
In Tagisma, the city nearby,  
Sho-oruk's daughter, Alikai,  
That poor girl, in rustling silk,  
Full of fear, as white as milk,  
I besieged, and he gave me as prize.  
Kara-Tadzhiks, before our eyes,  
All from despoliation fled.  
As if with that one I'd not wed,  
And had not felt the joy of life,  
Now it is difficult with such a wife..."<sup>35</sup>

Having no convincing argument against Manas's blames, Jakib left Talas in search of a suitable bride for his son. Traveling far and wide, he examined the beauties of Charjou, Tashkent, Jizzakh, Khiva, and Samarqand. None of those beauties satisfied his prerequisites for a bride to grace his home. Finally, he came to the town of Bukhara. There, Alim-Mirza, his aide, informed him about a most beautiful girl called Sanirabiyga at the palace of the Khan of Bukhara, Atemir. She has forty girls who live with her. Two in particular guard her against men. She, he thought, could become a suitable wife for Manas:

"Bey Jakib--she's her father's pride--  
He himself is called Atemir.  
Thirty years he has been a Khan here.  
That maiden's called Sanirabiyga.  
How many servants she has so far,  
That's only for her to know,  
May be a suite of some forty or so,  
Maiden friends and advisers, and such.  
Clearly, she will be hard to touch.  
Hard for her to be a bogatir's spouse.  
Two girls sit with her in the house.

---

<sup>35</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 83-84.

Two good sprites, one fairy withal.  
Men aren't allowed to see them at all.<sup>36</sup>

Alim-Mirza's description of the young lady pleased Jakib. The old father then managed to view the girl while hiding behind the rushes in the garden. Sanirabiyga was more enchanting in person than the girl that Alim-Mirza had described. Jakib then spoke to the girl's father who, after consulting his wife, refused to marry his daughter to an outsider. Jakib, however, persevered and agreed to accede to all the terms stipulated by Sanirabiyga's family. In order not to provoke the wrath of the nomads and yet not commit himself, Atemir offered a bride-price (*kalym*) that no one in his right mind would agree to. The bride price demanded large numbers of camels, cows, bulls, oxen, horses, and sheep, all specified in detail for color, age, and gender. In addition, the bride price included large amounts of silver and gold:

Sixty camels demand from him.  
You are all leaders, all in the swim,  
Just inform him, and find peace of mind.  
May Allah slay me, if them he'll find!  
Him and his like you can leave behind.  
Don't stand idle, think everything out.  
Of those sixty camels, all stout,  
Let there be thirty females light,  
Heads all black, and bodies all white!  
Leaders, stretch your minds out tight!  
Let the thirty male camels then  
Have black hair all over them,  
Only let their heads be white!  
That sly Kirghiz won't get them right!  
He will be a laughing-stock indeed.  
From the old man ask five hundred steeds.  
When he cannot find the right sort,  
You can say: "No cattle you brought!"  
Then on one side you him can cast,  
And find peace of mind at last.  
Then for two hundred cows you can ask,  
Even there you can set him a task:  
Say what colour their coats must be,  
So with the horses too, you see:  
On their foreheads white stars there must be,  
On their nose-ridge,--a polished line bare.  
From the handsome black horses, I'd say,  
You claim a hundred, and lead them away.  
If he objects, you can make reply:  
"That's the Khan's order! Now you know why!"  
You can demand black tails for the steeds,  
While the rest is pure white, indeed.  
He'll say: "Where can I find such a breed?"  
"Go and look, till you find what we need!"  
Let the pairs be all alike, every way.  
Not a scratch anywhere--dapple grey.  
Ask the unlucky Kara-Kirghiz

---

<sup>36</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 89.

For every kind of steed there is,  
Many he will not be able to find--  
That will drive him out of his mind!  
Chestnuts ask, all red, not browned.  
When by Kirghiz they can't be found--  
Let them remain without their bride!  
Black-maned duns, with lightish hide,  
Let them seek for them as well,  
Let them have a taste of hell!  
Ask for fifty, at least, of those,  
Greys and bays, in separate rows.  
Ask for twenty-five each of such--  
That will trouble the old man much!  
Six and seven-year cows then ask,  
Fifty whites, from first to last,  
But their bulls must be black,  
Head to tail, no going black!  
Fifty black cows next, that's right!  
But their bulls must all be white.  
Not a speck of black on them!  
That will puzzle those Kirghiz men!  
If you want him to run away--  
These you must demand that he pay!  
Next the oxen--the same with them.  
Twenty-five skewbalds--black-clotted then,  
Twenty-five skewbalds--red-spotted those,  
Others--well, you know how it goes!  
Altogether two hundred beasts--  
That, I must say, is the very least!  
Count them over, mark them well.  
Then for sheep you must ring the bell!  
Thousand black, and a thousand white.  
Then with cattle we'll fare all right!  
Next--gold pieces, pure gold gilde,  
Riches that they don't know, you say.  
Ask, then, for forty thousand in gold,  
Ask, then, one thousand in silver, all told.  
If they have none of these at hand,  
If they seek in another land,  
Try to borrow them from Kitais--  
You can expose these rogues likewise!<sup>37</sup>

Jakib accepted the terms. Happy to have received Atemir's consent, he left Bukhara for Talas to inform Manas of his good fortune. Manas, upon hearing his father's report, prepared the bride-price according to the demands of Sanirabiyga's father and, with a large army, set out for Bukhara on a match-making trip of his own. Sanirabiyga's father received Manas warmly. His heart not being in the forthcoming marriage, he spent a good deal of the time examining the bride-price rather than spend it with his prospective son-in-law. He looked for that one mistake that could enable him to annul the contract that he had signed with Jakib.

---

<sup>37</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 114-116.

Offended at his host's lack of hospitality, Manas, aided by Agibai, sneaked into the ruler's harem and entered the private chamber of his bride-to-be. Sanirabiyga, armed with a sword, faced Manas. She recognized the nomad hero and liked him but, at the same time, she pretended ignorance:

"Who are you, who have crossed the lake?  
Who are you, who such liberty take?...  
Who are you, to come with such pride,  
Pushing my seven maidens aside?  
Who are you, who have thrust your way,  
Late at night, avoiding the day,  
Brushing aside those on watch and guard,  
Entering this our palace yard?  
Who are you, who take as your own,  
My bed-chamber, which no man has known?"<sup>38</sup>

Manas identified himself and informed his prospective bride of the presents that he had brought and deposited at the treasury of her father, the Khan:

"I am Manas, and cattle I've paid  
To your father for you, dear maid!  
I have brought camels and many a steed,  
I have brought gold and silver, indeed!  
I have named you, Sanirabiyga--  
To be my bride, so there you are!"<sup>39</sup>

Rather than calming her down, Manas's words infuriated Sanirabiyga. She attacked the hero with her sword and inflicted a light wound on his left arm. Her audacity enraged Manas. He knocked Sanirabiyga down, walked out of her chamber, and out of the palace grounds.

Sanirabiyga's father was unaware of all that. After he viewed the presents that Manas and his accompanying Khans had brought, he returned to his guests, entertained them, and assigned each a special *yurta* with women servants. Women who were assigned to Manas's *yurta*, due to his awesome person, did not enter his chamber for three days. The hero, thus, remained isolated for three days without any food or drink. When on the fourth day his forty companions visited him, he beat them all up and issued an order for the sack of Bukhara. Jakib and Sanirabiyga intervened:

"I [Sanirabiyga] have offended you, Khan bogatir.  
Far too much I demanded of you,  
But these folks aren't to blame, it's true!  
I to test your character tried,  
That was the trick of your fated bride.  
These Tadzhiks are innocent quite--  
No need to vent on them your spite...  
Truly, I submit to you now!  
Master, make up your mind somehow!  
Let your hot anger now cool down,

---

<sup>38</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 142.



Cease to look on me with a frown.  
Just be calm, and from fury refrain.  
Do not punish my folk, I am to blame!  
Now attain that for which you came!<sup>40</sup>

After their earnest plea, Manas forgave Sanirabiyga and spared the Tajik population of Bukhara from destruction by his troops. The Bukharans reciprocated by preparing forty-one weddings for Manas and his forty companions. Forty-one *yurtas* were prepared with a bride-to-be in each. Bogatirs rode their horses about. The horseman, whose horse stopped at a certain *yurta*, married the girl who was waiting for him in that *yurta*. It so happened that Manas's horse stopped at Sanirabiyga's *yurta*. After marriage, the couple came to be known to the Kyrgyz as Manas and Kanikei. Sanirabiyga was too difficult for the Kyrgyz to pronounce:

Those whom hostile struggle had met,  
Now on a peaceful course were set.  
With Manas--Sanirabiyga,  
She whom he courted--man and wife are!  
Abilkasim then mounted his horse,  
Called to the people with all his force:  
"Atemir's daughter, Sanirabiyga  
Now is Manas's bride--there you are!"  
All the Kirghiz, both near and far,  
Knew not the name "Sanirabiyga"  
Such a difficult name could not say,  
And already called her "Kanikei"...<sup>41</sup>

### The Funeral Repast for Koketei Khan

Obedied by six Kyrgyz tribes around the town of Tashkent, wealthy and influential chief Koketei died while his only heir, fifteen-year old stepson, Bokmurun, was away. In Bokmurun's absence, Koketei left his will and testament with his old friend Baimirza with clear directions. He asked for a simple funeral with little or no pomp and ceremony. As if it were a celebration held for a child or a wake for an old woman:

Just as though a feast for a bride,  
Let them bury me after I have died.  
Just as though a child's game beside,  
Just as an old woman's feast may be,  
Or some poor peasant's remember me.  
Let them not notice me, dead or alive.  
So, with no upset, let folk survive.  
Two or three beasts having slain and bared,  
Forty or fifty gowns having shared,  
Let them bury me somewhere--who knows!  
In river valley an aspen grows.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 157.

<sup>41</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 159.

<sup>42</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 187.

In fact, Koketei enumerated the people and the tribes that his family should not contact in relation to his death. He especially emphasized that, even though he had cooperated with Manas in the past, his son, Bokmurun, should not contact Manas and ask him to participate in the simple ceremony.<sup>43</sup> The ceremony was to be held under the personal supervision of Baimirza:

Having settled on spacious Talas,  
There is found the leader Manas--  
One who is known as a bold bogatir,  
One undefeated by enemies there.  
Tell him not then "Koketei is dead!  
He before Allah has bowed his head,  
He has submitted to highest will.  
We have interred him, respecting him still!  
Tell him not then about the deceased,  
Make him not head of the funeral feast.  
Bring him not here, in tears to soak,  
Thus to trouble our good little folk,  
Causing them all to moan and groan.  
Take care of the feast on your own."<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, Baimirza reported Koketei Khan's wishes to Bokmurun and insisted that the chief's will and testament should be carried out exactly according to his wishes. Bokmurun took exception to his father's terms. He made a distinction between what his father had wished and what he would have decreed given different circumstances. He believed that his father's wishes had been made in relation to the future well-being of his family and tribe. In other words, Bokmurun identified the things that Koketei Khan had prohibited to be the exact things that, under different circumstances, his father himself would have decreed to be carried out as part and parcel of a funeral feast. With that in mind, rather than preparing for a small wake, he contacted Manas and asked for his assistance not only in gathering the largest congregation possible, but also to hold a most impressive and memorable feast ever held for a deceased Kyrgyz khan. Bokmurun did not inform Manas about his father's actual will:

But to Baimirza, our dear friend,  
He told all, ere he met his end.  
He asked that you be informed  
How heavy burdens on us had stormed,  
And ere he left for that other land,  
Father had sent me his last command:  
"Go and speak with Manas-bogatir!"<sup>45</sup>

Recognizing the contributions of Koketei Khan to the well-being of his people, Manas advised Bokmurun to follow his own feelings and hold a feast fitting for the great khan that Koketei Khan had been. Subsequently, Bokmurun held two feasts. The first feast was for the Khan's relatives, close friends, and the Kyrgyz of Central Asia at large.

---

<sup>43</sup> Koketei had helped Manas in the course of the latter's defeat of Khan-Panus of Tashkent. For his efforts, Manas had made Koketei Khan the governor of Tashkent.

<sup>44</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, p. 216.

This feast was held during the first forty days after his father's death. Then, when all the guests had assembled, he announced his intention to hold another feast in two years' time. That repast, he announced, will be a most unprecedented funeral feast ever given. To his delight, his relatives declared their support and pledged to help him hold the feast according to his wishes. The same assembly also decided the place (Karkira) and the time (early autumn) for holding the feast:

"Maybe you'll all agree with me,  
And with what I have to say--let's see!  
To the west there lies Issik-Kul,  
Beautiful land, and lake brim-full!  
If your steeds by Ili you chase,  
There you will find a place for the race.  
All is convenient for us there--  
Rivers and pastures everywhere,  
Trees on every side there are--  
That wide space is called Karkira.  
There is salt to evaporate,  
And no sediment will it make.  
Firs and birches and poplars are there,  
You have your logs, and some to spare,  
If you cut down some of those trees.  
Places for races you'd find with ease.  
That's a good place for holding the feast!"  
All the tribe-leaders gathered there  
Eager agreement began to declare.  
They decided this matter first,  
They thanked everyone, then dispersed.  
Time for the feast was decided too--  
When summer's hottest days were through,  
When the cattle well-fed were found,  
When the autumn gold falls around,  
When the peasants winnow again,  
When they pour out and take early grain.  
To Samarkand and Kokand, not far--  
Then they'd migrate to Karkira  
With old white-beard Koshoi at their head.  
Now, just see, it is as we said:  
All the bogatirs who had met  
Went off home, all ready and set.  
When the sultry heat declined,  
When the autumn days were more kind,  
They decided their people to call.  
In Karkira they would gather all.<sup>46</sup>

Following the advice of the tribal leaders, within the following two years, Bokmurun moved his people to Karkira. There, Bokmurun and Baimirza faced a different disagreement. They were in conflict regarding what guests to invite:

---

<sup>46</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 256-57.

"Since my father's final day,  
Just three years have passed away.  
How shall we let everyone know?  
How many then will join us so?  
Let the best of us head the feast!"  
Bokmurun begged this of them.  
Baimirza started speaking then.  
Everyone present gave him a hand:  
"From Andizhan and from Kokand,  
So he turned the discussion's track--  
"Let us call the Kara-Kalmaks,  
To the memorial ceremony.  
Let's count up how many there'll be.  
If we invite, let it be the wise,  
With a Shah's knowledge in their eyes.  
That means we'll surely call Manas!  
Then Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Kalmaks--  
Forebears' spirit we thus shall please!  
Let's call those who'll add to the feast!  
Let us call just a few of the Sarts  
With many tribes of the Kara-Kirghiz,  
We shall leave the affair as it is!"<sup>47</sup>

Bokmurun did not like Baimirza's selection of guests. Baimirza had concentrated on the grantees and had ignored everyone else. Bokmurun thought they should widen the scope of the feast and invite almost everyone. He intended to set an example that would delight the soul of the departed for centuries to come.

Bokmurun rebuked Baimirza harshly and called the old man mean spirited. In addition to the grantees, he said, he intended to invite heathens, Muslims, angels, and devils. He intended to develop, he said, a spirit of mutual understanding, unity, and generosity. As a result, the total number of the guests who attended the repast exceeded 620,000:

"You brew very black tea, Baimirza!  
You won't find a steed to go far  
With such news as you now propose.  
Who could agree with such words as those?  
I shared my powers with you, old man,  
See to the measures which you began.  
I it was rescued your village, you know,  
When Sergil set upon it so.  
As it should be when the feast we must run,  
When your own father's days are done,  
Think, and remember, and get to the roots.  
I will give everything that suits.  
From the whole world which lies around,  
All I shall call, and my trumpet sound,  
Heathens and Mussulmen as well,  
All them together then I'll tell.  
If God so wishes that it should be.  
One thing alone bewilders me:

---

<sup>47</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 261-62.

Who taught you, then, to be so mean?  
Not only people--I will call those between--  
Angels and devils from every side,  
Mermen and mermaids call from the tide.  
Sprite and pixies, hobgoblins I'll call.  
You seem to want to eat and drink all;  
Recently you have shown such greed,  
Showing a lower person, indeed.  
You are concerned your opinion to keep,  
Only meanness robs you of sleep.  
If you repeat selfish words again,  
You, one day soon, will find yourself slain!  
Very few people support you in this--  
Most look for something nobler, that is!  
You only seek your meanness to share.  
Let there be sables to spread everywhere!  
For far successors who come after us,  
Let us now set an example thus!  
Earlier there has been no such feast,  
Nothing to honor a father deceased.  
Nobody willing to call in their guests,  
Willing to share everything that rests,  
Calling them on, whatever betides,  
Setting successors a pattern besides!  
I have tried an example to be:  
Now let the others imitate me.  
You are a man whom I thought wide.  
Koketei, long before he died,  
Gathered great treasure to fill his store.  
Though he grew rich, owning more and more,  
When he drew his last mortal breath,  
Did it all help him to ward off death?  
Riches and power were worth naught that day--  
Over his breast a grey mist lay...<sup>48</sup>

Bokmurun then sent Aidar to invite the chiefs of all the tribes. He instructed Aidar in detail where to go, which chiefs to talk to, and what exactly to say. Aidar was instructed to persuade the chiefs who refuse to comply with threats of possible raids on their tribe. No tribes should be left out, Aidar was instructed.

The number of tribal chiefs that agreed to participate was large as was the number of warriors who accompanied the chiefs. The numbers, are indicative of two things: the nature of the epic genre as well as the nature of the event. Epics are well known for exaggeration and repetition. The exaggeration includes the number of people attending, the uniqueness of the location of the event, and the importance of the characters involved. The repetitions include expression of the same idea in several ways, repetition of whole episodes, repetition of speeches, lines and words.<sup>49</sup>

While reading, consider the following. Tribes are introduced by the son of the chief, who reflects the experiences and wisdom of his father. Fathers take advantage of the feast as an occasion to inculcate the ways of the tribe in their sons. Usually a clear line is

---

<sup>48</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 262-63.

<sup>49</sup> For more information, see May, *Manas*, vol. 1, pp. 7-8.

drawn between the friends and the foes of the tribe holding the wake. Yet both sides are invited and introduced. Tribes usually support the ideology prevalent among their members, but they do not shy away from mingling with other ideologies, especially those with which they differ. Finally, a word about the translation. The *manaschi* recites each episode out loud and with appropriate cadence. Walter May has made every effort to present a version of *Manas* to the English speaking world that takes the unfamiliarity of the work into account. In the following, pay special attention to his use of alliteration, and repetition in: "Let him...", "... they said...", and "... came in, With him...", and the like:

When Bokmurun grew anxious too,  
Then his father's relation, who knew,  
Thought, "He long since invited me.  
He is impatient, obviously!"  
This was the bold bogatir Bagish,  
He who owned the steed Suriyik.  
He was a sultan--there you are!  
He thought: "My town is Chirashya.  
My consolation, and my support,  
My son Toltoi I'll take, as I ought.  
Straight away now to the feast we'll go.  
If we did not, 'twould be shameful so!  
This is a special time, just now,  
Famous people gather, and how!  
Let my son see them, and with them strive,  
Let him meet them, while father's alive.  
Let him take a good look at them then,  
Let him see this world of brave men.  
Let him ride this earth around,  
Let me take him, my comforter sound,  
Let him see that land and its folk!"  
They set off then, as soon as he spoke.  
Not nearby, but distant their ways,  
There they rode on for thirty days,  
Through the Uch-Bulak vale afar,  
Onto the shores of Uch-Karkira.  
There were the yurtas spread around.  
To the great feast their way they found.  
Not at morn, but at evening time,  
When the sun had begun to decline,  
With four thousand men they came,  
This Bagish, and Toltoi, the same.  
They arrived, and began to dismount.  
Cattle for them were counted out.  
They were set aside for Bagish.  
After them, red banners a-swish,  
Crimson pennants waving on high,  
Comes the Kitai chief Kongurbai,  
With a rattle and clash he came,  
Good-for-nought, with a bogatir's name.  
"He was shooting with muskets!" they said,  
"Sons and their brides attack him!" they said,  
"Traitors deserted his army!" they said,  
"Terrible look he has!" they said,  
"Devil ran with his wife!" they said,  
"Shot at him with his gun!" they said,



"Enemy fell on his village!" they said,  
"War-tent loads on rhinos!" they said,  
"Blowing his trumpets and horns!" they said,  
"Scared everyone all around!" they said.  
In a trumpet with mouthpiece of brass  
He placed a tinder--a fiery blast.  
So with a clatter he rattled it then,  
With his hundred thousand men!  
Then came Kirmus' son, Muradil--  
That Kitai came with a clash as well!  
He arrived with ten thousand men.  
Red-tasseled Neskara came then,  
With him he brought seven thousand men.  
Bold Ushang, the Kalmak, came then,  
With him there were two thousand men.  
Alo-oke, from Solons, came then,  
With him were fifty thousand men.  
Giant Dzholio, the swank, came then,  
With him were thirty thousand men.  
Bozkertik, Toshuker, came then  
With him were thirty thousand men.  
So-oronduk, Solobon, came then,  
With him were thirty thousand men.  
Boro-onchu, the black beard, came then,  
With him were thirty thousand men.  
Orongu, the Kangai, came then,  
With him were ninety thousand men.  
Katkalang's daughter, Saikal, came then  
With her were ninety thousand men.  
Then, not lagging behind the rest,  
Nephew of Khan Dzhyugeru we see,  
On the road to Dzhiyranti,  
With him were twenty thousand men.  
All these came in one day then,  
All to sleep then down they lay.  
In the morn, at first sun-ray,  
Kekmek's son, Kerkekyul, came then,  
With him he brought two thousand men.  
Kechpes' son, bold Dzhanai, came then,  
With him were seven thousand men.  
Following after them there came  
Answering Bokmurun's wish, the same  
Giant Koshoi, the son of a bey,  
Riding his grey steed on the way,  
Smoothly along the way he steered,  
With his waving long white beard,  
Cackling, like migrating geese,  
Came your uncle, if you please,  
Making the sods and the stones all fly,  
Rising a cloud of dust to the sky,  
Trumpets blazing, with deafening cry,  
Banners beating on banners high,  
With him came thirty thousand men,  
Covering all the countryside then.  
Since Teshtyuk went underground,  
Seven years had rolled around.

Since he returned to earthly ways,  
There had passed just seven days.  
Thinking: "If one is well-bred, at least,  
One can't refuse a memorial feast!"  
Thus Teshtyuk himself came then,  
With him there came four thousand men.  
While they all made a fuss and din,  
While they all were settling in,  
He who dwells on Sara-Arke,  
He who leads hordes of Kazakhs away,  
He who behind his sable-doors kept  
Ketebelya, his steed well-fed,  
He who any threatening foe  
Would behead, and be quit of him so,  
He with black-patterned white felt hat,  
Pantaloon yellow, silk belt at that!  
Shoes gold-soled, and brazen-heeled were,  
Aidarkan's son, the bold Kekche,  
By the road from Opol he came then,  
With him were thirty thousand men.  
Following after, hot on his heels,  
He who no pity for any foe feels,  
He who raises the dust all around,  
Hurls his opponent down on the ground,  
Covers the contest square with blood,  
He, who with fury in full flood  
Frightens to death his enemy, see--  
Son of Eshtek, brave Dzhamagirhi,  
Came with his seven thousand men.  
Following in his tracks came then  
He, who has pastures on Eki-Kemin,  
He with a pair of black steeds with him,  
He, who in arguing sticks to what's true,  
Knows no defeat--strong-minded Urbyu,  
First as Dervish and teacher he's famed,  
First in conversation he's named,  
First in eloquence, bold and clear,  
First of Kipchaks--their brave bogatir,  
Twelve thousand warriors with him here  
Came to the games, and festive cheer.  
He is a man of special respect.  
After him others began to collect--  
He who through sacred Bukhara came,  
Through the old ruins, Chambil by name,  
He who in Orto-Chatkal abides,  
He who is subject to none besides,  
He whom none did ever defeat,  
Round whose waist the weapons meet,  
Son of Buudayik, Muzburchak,  
With nine thousand men of pluck,  
All along the road to Chadbar  
Came to honor the dead from afar.  
For all those who would know our ways,  
These were very special days.  
After the first of the guests had come,  
After they'd made themselves at home,

After they'd been here eleven days,  
After the twelfth day's first sun-rays,  
From Sakalat came the giant Sari,  
With six thousand men came he.  
After that Kekubat came then,  
With him were seven thousand men.  
Khan Debyul, from Debets, came then,  
Heading three thousand warrior men.  
Giant Choyan, self-named bogatir,  
Giant Dzho-on, with griffin-tail clear,  
Giant Kaman, with sharp scissor-ears,  
Giant Kiten, with steel navel appears.  
All from the tribes of Zhez-Tumshuk,  
They filled a place in the bill, just look!  
Their padishahs with three thousand came then,  
Others brought one hundred thousand men.  
On the roads from borders afar,  
With the boldest young men there are,  
With two hundred warrior men,  
Maamit-sultan came then.  
Khan Kemel came with a hundred men,  
Aikodzho came with three men then.  
On the road they take to Chadbar  
Iybankup with his men from afar--  
All in all--just a hundred men,  
Bakyuryush with a thousand of them.  
Not one man came aimless though,  
On the road leading through Ala-Too.  
From Oogan Khan Akim came then,  
With his six thousand-odd warrior men,  
When they saw such numberless folk,  
Many fell dumb, no words they spoke.  
In one month of thirty days  
Many folk met with great amaze.  
They came as guests all summer through,  
Meeting and talking, so much to do,  
While all these guests had not yet met.  
While the month had not ended yet,  
Still Manas bogatir was not there.  
All the Mussulmen started to swear.  
Just what to think they did not know...  
Back to young Aidar let us go...<sup>50</sup>

Manas was the last leader to arrive. The chiefs of the tribes, led by old man Koshoi, met him and expressed their disappointment regarding the hero's lack of consideration for the guests. Manas explained that he had spent the entire last month attending to peoples' business and sorting out the affairs of the kingdom.

As explained earlier, one of the main features of the funeral feasts was the fights that broke out among the leaders of the tribes, or among the heads of the countries participating in the feast. For instance, there is a fight between Bokmurun and the Chinese Khan Konurbai. The latter intended to force Bokmurun to make a gift of his horse, Maaniker, to him. Konurbai argued that Bokmurun had given his best steed to

---

<sup>50</sup> May, *Manas*, vol. 2, pp. 283-88.

Manas. Consequently, he, Konurbai, should receive Bokmurun's next best horse. Konurbai threatened that there would be trouble, if his demand was not met.

The news of Konurbai's demand enraged Manas. Interpreting the transgression as an affront to all the Kyrgyz chiefs attending the feast, he called on his warriors to assemble for battle. But before the incident grew into a major conflict, other Chinese khans intervened and the matter was settled amicably.<sup>51</sup>

Another feature of the feasts was the contests that were organized among the participating athletes. Those included wrestling matches, shooting, javelin throwing and, of course, horse racing. The wrestling match was between Joloi and old Koshoi. It lasted twenty-four hours. The match ended when Manas entered the ring and, with a blow of his fist, knocked Joloi out.

Similarly, a spear throwing match on horseback was organized between Manas and his nemesis, Konurbai. The contest was arranged such that the contestants would overpower each other by the accuracy of their aim and the power of their arms. It turned out that the two warriors were of equal strength. Neither could harm the other while on horseback. They dismount to engage in single combat. The match was stopped. The athletes were instructed to ride their horses and continue the fight as initially arranged. The match was resumed. It ended with Manas defeating Konurbai.

The main event, of course, was horse-racing. The contestants were the Chinese athletes versus the Kyrgyz riders. Both Manas and Konurbai participated. Manas, riding Ak-Kula,<sup>52</sup> rode some distance ahead of all the others. Seeing that, the angry Konurbai seized the opportunity and tried to disable Ak-Kula and, by doing so, force Manas out of the race. Almambet, running third, came to Manas's aid. He knocked Konurbai's horse down and paved the way for a clear victory for Manas.

At the end of the feast, all the cattle pledged as awards for the various competitions were won by the Kyrgyz. Unhappy, the Chinese raided the camp of the Kyrgyz and drove the cattle away. That forced Manas and his warriors to give chase, catch up, fight the Chinese, and retrieve their newly-earned property. Once again, the Kyrgyz were victorious. They returned to their camping ground driving the cattle that had been driven away by Konurbai and Joloi.

### **Manas's Death**

As old age approached Manas, like his father, began to feel unfulfilled. His many wives had not brought him a son who could continue his line and consolidate his many political and military achievements. Thus, upon his triumphant return from the "Great March" in which he had defeated the Chinese, he decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to plead to Allah for a son. Before setting out for Mecca, however, Kanikei informed him that she was pregnant. And, before long, she bore Manas a son whom they called Semetei.

---

<sup>51</sup> The conflicts between the Chinese and the Kyrgyz must be understood in the context of the Kyrgyz claim to the lands around the Altai. Before Manas and Alo-oke, the Alai region had served as camping ground for the Kyrgyz. Manas recognized this right and demanded that the Chinese allow the Kyrgyz graze in the region without being harassed. King Alo-oke denied any such rights.

<sup>52</sup> The term "ak," with the meaning "white," carries special, magical connotations. Used frequently in names, it denotes excellence in quality. The designations of a bogatir's sword, horse, or gun usually include this word. For instance, the name of Manas's special horse was Ak-Kula (cream colored).

As usual, Semetei's birth was celebrated with a sumptuous feast to which all the heads of tribes, as well as the kings of the neighboring lands, including Manas's Chinese nemesis, Konurbai, were invited. Dictated by tradition, numerous contests and competitions, with worthy prizes, were organized for the people to enjoy.

Manas's conflict with the Chinese did not end with the victory in the "Great March." Rather, the Chinese champions continued their conspiratorial endeavors until they reached their goal (i.e., the destruction of the main source of the strength of the Kyrgyz: Manas). Thus, in the final conflict with the Kyrgyz bogatir, Konurbai attacked Manas from behind and dealt a very heavy blow on the champion's head. At the same time, another Chinese champion shot an arrow at Manas that lodged itself in the champion's right cheek. This latter injury sealed the fate of Manas.

According to Manas's will and testament, his forty warriors-in-arms carried his body to an isolated spot away from the battlefield and buried it. Manas's high rank then passed on to his brother, Kobesh. Kobesh tried, unsuccessfully, to marry Kanikei, his deceased brother's wife. Kanikei refused Kobesh's request. That made her position in the tribe precarious to the point that Kobesh set a price on the heads of both Kanikei and Semetei. Helped by Manas's faithful companions, the mother and child fled to Bukhara where they remained until Semetei came of age.

## Bibliography

- Aitmatov, Chingiz. "The High Peak of the Spirit of the Ancient Kyrgyz," *Manas: Epic Hero of the Kyrgyz People* (Aslam Adham, trans.), International al-Huda Publishers, 1996.
- Aliev, S., Saripbekov, R., Matiev K., (eds.), *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas': Articles Collection*, Glavnaya redaktsia Kirgizskoi Entsiklopedii, 1995.
- Allsen, Thomas T. *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire. A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Arik, Kagan, "1000th Anniversary of *Manas*," *Kazakh and Kirghiz Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 2, University of Washington, 1995-1996.
- Bashiri, Iraj. "Chingiz Aitmatov: Life and Works,"  
[https://www.academia.edu/7870749/Chingiz\\_Aitmatov\\_Life\\_and\\_Works](https://www.academia.edu/7870749/Chingiz_Aitmatov_Life_and_Works)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Firdowsi's Shahname: 1000 Years After*, Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, 1994.
- Kochumkulkizi, Elmira, "The Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*,"  
<http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/folklore/manas/manasintro.html>
- May, Walter (tran.). *Manas*, 2 vols., Door of AIP Publishers, 1995.
- Musaev, S. *Epos Manas: nauchno-populiarnyi ocherk*, Ilim Publishers, 1995.
- Rakhmatullin, K. "Plot peculiarities of 'Manas' versions," *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas': Articles Collection* (eds. R. S. Aliev and S.K. Matiev), Glavnaya redaktsia Kirgizskoi Entsiklopedii, 1995.
- Rachewiltz, Igor de (trans.) *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, The Australian National University, 2015.
- Ratchnevsky, Paul. *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, Blackwell, 1991.
- Valikhanov, Ch. *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, Kazakhskoe izd-vo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958.
- Van der Heide, N., *Spirited Performance. The Manas Epic and Society in Kyrgyzstan*, Amsterdam, 2008.