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

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

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

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

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

III. In Seitek Destruction of Semetei's family; Capture of Aichürök and Külchoro; Seitek's growing up in Kïiaz's palace; Fighting against the internal enemies; Seitek's marriage; His defeat of the external enemies and death.

It is not known when and by whom the epic *Manas* was composed originally. People remembered deeds and kindness of certain historical personalities for a long time and their jomokchus, i.e., storytellers or epic singers, developed some of those major historical events into epic songs in which they glorified the life and the deeds of the hero. The singer named Ïrchï uul, who acts as one of the forty companions of the hero Manas in some episodes, is remembered among the Kyrgyz. According a legend, it was Ïrchï uul who composed the original
version or the first lines of Manas in the form of a lament, glorifying the heroic deeds of Manas after his death. Later, all the laments were brought together by a legendary singer named Toktogul, who is believed to have lived about 500 years ago and created the epic Manas out of those separate songs. [36]

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

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

During the various stages of becoming masters of the epic, manaschïs were divided according to their poetic and improvisational skills into three categories: üyrönchük manashcï (new learner manaschï), chala manshï (not a true manaschï), chïnïgï manaschï ("true manaschï), and finally chong manaschï (great manaschï).

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### Narrative of Manas

The epic tells the story of Manas, his descendants and his followers. Battles against Khitan and Oirat enemies form a central theme in the epic. The epic is divided into three parts, each consisting of a loose collection of episodic heroic events.
The Epic of Manas is divided into 3 books. The first is entitled "Manas", the second episode describes the deeds of his son Semetei, and the third of his grandson Seitek. The epic begins with the destruction and difficulties caused by the invasion of the Oirats. Zhakyp reaches maturity in this time as an owner of many herds without a single heir. His prayers are eventually answered, and on the day of his son's birth, he dedicates a colt, Toruchaar, born the same day to his son's service. The son is unique among his peers for strength, mischief, and generosity. The Oirat learn of this young warrior and warn their leader. A plan is hatched to capture the young Manas. They fail in this task, and Manas is able to rally his people and is eventually elected and proclaimed as khan.

Manas expands his reach to include that of the Uyghurs of Moghulistan on the southern border of Jungaria. One of the defeated Uighur rulers gives his daughter to Manas in marriage. At this point, the Kyrgyz people chose, with Manas' help, to return from the Altai mountains to their "ancestral lands" in the mountains of modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Manas begins his successful campaigns against his neighbors accompanied by his forty companions. Manas turns eventually to face the Afghan people to the south in battle, where after defeat the Afghans enter into an alliance with Manas. Manas then comes into a relationship with the people of mā warāʾ an-nār through marriage to the daughter of the ruler of Bukhara.

The epic continues in various forms, depending on the publication and whim of the manaschi, or reciter of the epic.

**History of Manas**

The epic poem's age is unknowable, as it was transmitted orally without being recorded. However, historians have doubted the age claimed for it since the turn of the 20th century. The primary reason is that the events portrayed occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries. Renowned Central Asian historian V. V. Bartol'd referred to Manas as an "absurd gallimaufry of pseudo-history,"[1] and Hatto remarks that Manas was "compiled to glorify the Sufi sheikhs of Shirkent and Kasan ... [and] circumstances make it highly probable that... [Manas] is a late eighteenth-century interpolation."[2]

Changes were made in the delivery and textual representation of Manas in the 1920s and 1930s to represent the creation of the Kyrgyz nationality, particularly the replacement of the tribal background of Manas. In the 19th century versions, Manas is the leader of the Nogay people, while in versions dating after 1920, Manas is a Kyrgyz and a leader of the Kyrgyz.[3]

Attempts have been made to connect modern Kyrgyz with the Yenisei Kirghiz, today claimed by Kyrgyzstan to be the ancestors of modern Kyrgyz. Kazakh ethnographer and historian Shokan Shinghisuly Walikhanuli was unable to find evidence of folk-memory during his extended research in 19th-century Kyrgyzstan (then part of the expanding Russian empire) nor has any been found since.[4]
Recitation of Manas

Manas is the classic centerpiece of Kyrgyz literature, and parts of it are often recited at Kyrgyz festivities by specialists in the epic, called **Manaschi** (*Кыргыз: Манащы*). Manaschis tell the tale in a melodic chant unaccompanied by musical instruments.

Kyrgyzstan has many Manaschis. Narrators who know all three episodes of the epic (the tales of Manas, of his son Semetei and of his grandson Seitek) can acquire the status of Great Manaschi. Great Manaschis of the 20th century are Sagimbai Orozbakov, Sayakbai Karalayev, Shaabai Azizov (pictured), Kaba Atabekov, Seidene Moldokova and Yusup Mamai. A revered Manaschi who recently visited the United Kingdom is Rysbek Jumabayev. Urkash Mambetaliev, the Manaschi of the Bishkek Philharmonic, also travels through Europe. Talantaaly Bakchiyev combines recitation with critical study.

There are more than 65 written versions of parts of the epic. An English translation of the version of Sagimbai Orozbakov by Walter May was published in 1995, in commemoration of the presumed 1000th anniversary of Manas' birth, and re-issued in two volumes in 2004. Arthur Hatto has made English translations of the Manas tales recorded by Shokan Valikhanov and Vasily Radlov in the 19th century.

Manas today

Manas is said to have been buried in the Ala-Too mountains in Talas Province, in northwestern Kyrgyzstan. A mausoleum some 40 km east of the town of Talas is believed to house his remains and is a popular destination for Kyrgyz travellers. Traditional Kyrgyz horsemanship games are held there every summer since 1995. An inscription on the mausoleum states, however, that it is dedicated to "...the most famous of women, Kenizek-Khatun, the daughter of the emir Abuka". Legend has it that Kanikey, Manas' widow, ordered this inscription in an effort to confuse her husband's enemies and prevent a defiling of his grave. The name of the building is "Manastin Khumbuzu" or "The Dome of Manas", and the date of its erection is unknown. There is a museum dedicated to Manas and his legend nearby the tomb.

Influence of Manas

- University of Manas - the name of university in the city of Bishkek.
- Manas - the name of the airport in the city of Bishkek.
- A minor planet, 3349 Manas was discovered by Soviet astronomer Nikolai Stepanovich Chernykh in 1979.[5]
The highest award in Kyrgyzstan is the Order of Manas

*Manas* - opera, composed by Abdylas Maldybaev

*Manas* - album by the metal band Darkestrah

Petromanas Energy Inc. (http://www.petromanas.com/s/Home.asp) - Albanian focused energy exploration company

Translators

*Manas* has been translated into many languages. The Uzbek poet Mirtemir translated the poem into Uzbek.[6]

See also

- Music of Kyrgyzstan

References


External links


Manas (http://aton.ttu.edu/turkishlist.asp) at the Uysal-Walker Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative, Texas Tech University
- In-depth site on Manas with translated sections of the epic (http://www.silk-road.com/folklore/manas/manasintro.html)
- Manas (http://www.china.org.cn/english/27142.htm) at China.org.cn
- "Manas: The Kyrgyz Odysseys, Moses, and Washington" (http://www.sras.org/manas_kyrgyz_hero), article examining the place of Manas in Kyrgyz mythology and national identity
- Video of Manas Epic recitations (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMDklwoLf34#t=1m29s)


Categories: Turkic epic poems | Kyrgyzstani poetry | Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity | Turkic mythology | National symbols of Kyrgyzstan

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