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УДК 94(575.2)

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**EPOS “MANAS” AS THE GREATEST MONUMENT OF ORAL FOLK CREATIVITY AND ITS ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF THE CULTURE OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF KYRGYZ PEOPLE**

*Manas* is a great part of Kyrgyz heritage and a wonderful work, which surprised mankind by being a world-level cultural achievement. The fist link to point to is the name of the title character: Manas It is related to the word "mana," which can still be found in many languages, including English, with the meanings:

1) pervasive supernatural or magical power [1];
2) Maori term indicating status, esteem, prestige or authority [2].

Epic *Manas* “….may be called the encyclopaedia of the Kyrgyz people who live among the inaccessible mountains of Central Asia. It is an encyclopaedia which contains the tales, the mythology, the way of life of the Kirgiz and the history of their relations with neighbours; and expresses them clustered around the name of single hero Manas. It is Iliad of the Kyrgyz” [3]. It is a unique monumental epic work of oral art, and its great variety reflects not only the history but all sides of the people’s life. “Manas” is not only the historiography of the Kyrgyz, but also a work which deeply
reflects the scientific views on philosophy, astronomy, history and mathematics of the Turkish people. It falls into eight episodes, totaling 20 million characters. *Manas* is a trilogy: a biographical cycle of three generations of heroes, including Manas, his son Semetei, and grandson Seitek.

The nomadic Kyrgyz historically experienced many wars and battles with their traditional enemies and invaders. In difficult times when they were defeated by their enemies and exiled to far away lands, as it is the case in *Manas*, people longed for an ideal hero to reunite and protect them.

In traditional Kirgiz epic songs, the main hero should not die. If he dies, he leaves an heir behind to protect his people. Therefore, upon Manas death, his son Semetei continues his legacy, and when Semetei dies, his heir Seitek is born to protect his people. However, the epic *Manas* does not end with Seitek.

Although some of the main stories in the epic deal with the 17th and 18th centuries, there are many archaic elements and themes that reflect its ancient origin. As time passed, the "primitive" plot as well as the archaic language of the epic went through many poetic transformations adapting to new historical, socio-economic and religious developments of each century or decade.

At over half a million lines, epic *Manas* recounts the story of the warrior leader Manas who led the Kyrgyz to victory against Kalmak enemies. On the basis of his pioneering research on the *Manas* epos, Radlov wrote that ‘the Kyrgyz are especially remarkable for their strong and lasting feeling of the people’s unity, which is so clearly manifested in their epic poetry’ [4].

The epic captures the history of major inter-tribal and inter-ethnic battles and victories, delineates foes and friends of the Kyrgyz ethos and reflects philosophy of a national unity, as well as heroic actions of the main character and his followers. In order to understand the Kyrgyz people one must understand the importance of *The Epic of Manas*, the oldest, the longest and the most compelling oral story of the world. Each and every tradition and custom of modern Kyrgyzstan and all Turkic (or even more general: Altaic) countries can be found in this Epic which also refers to over 532 geographical locations and mentions over 113 ethnic groups.

Manas is a collective image of a male, who is a warrior, defender of the Motherland, exemplary son, husband and a father. The epic depicts the Kyrgyz people’s life style and the value of inter-personal relations. Underlining the enormous importance of Manas's destiny and mission, the epic tells that a wise old man, the dervish Berdike, selected Manas' name with these words (in May's translation) [5]:

*At its beginning stands letter “M”*

*As in Mohammed’s most blessed name!*

*In the middle stands letter “N”,*

*That means Nabi (Prophet)- prophetic man.*

*Then at its end stands the letter “S”*

*This is the tail of a Lion, no less!*

*What name do these three consonants make?*

*From these three letters the sounds we take,*

*Reading them out we get “MaNaS”* [6].

From the first lines of the epic, the Manas character seems to provide an ultimate
epitome of a national soldier:

*Running when seeing an enemy,*
*Fast like whirlwind,*
*The man ferocious like a tiger had passed*
*Who was it? If not the hero?*

The poem begins with the ancestry and birth of the hero, which is first prophesized and surrounded by unusual portents. His father, an aging though wealthy and generous leader of his people, is without a son or heir. He visits a holy place, prays for a son and soon after his wife becomes pregnant. She develops cravings for tiger meat. The proud father-to-be spares no effort getting it and care is taken to keep it a secret from the Uyghers, indicating its importance to the Kyrgyz. All the while, wise men describe the deeds Manas will accomplish and the armies he will lead. When he is born, he leaps from the womb and lands on his feet, ready to fight.

*"With a face like wheat smeared with oil,*
*With his eyes glowering like an evening fog,*
*And looking like a hungry lion,*
*There will appear a famous Manas khan,*
*People will be terrified by his wrath.*
*He will be born among the Buruts,*
*When Manas will mount a horse,*
*Your Turgoots will be wiped out.*

*Of medium height but broad in the shoulder,*
*Manas will be born among the Kyrgyz,*
*People will be terrified by his wrath.*
*They will bring forth a perfect man,*
*Manas, a lion, will be born among the Buruts,*
*His steps will stir up a sandstorm,*
*His voice will scare people to death.*
*A lion will be born,*

*A brave man who will destroy the world will be born* [7].

Manas' strength is drawn from the animal spirits protecting him: there is a lion at his side, a giant hawk overhead, and a dragon leads his way.

Manas is a profoundly ethno-centric identification of patriotism, it contains a spirit of defending the Kyrgyz nation from outsiders and befriending with the neighboring nationalities. The Kyrgyz epic is born out of the heroic efforts of Kyrgyz tribal lords who, in AD 840, successfully fought the Uigurs and destroyed their capital of Bei-tin. Praises of this victory form the core songs out of which the monumental epic finally emerges. The main episodes (i) in Manas (11170 lines) relate to: birth of Manas and his childhood, his first heroic deeds; his marriage to Kanikei; his military campaign against Beijing; and death of Manas, and destruction of his achievements. In Semetey, the second part (15017 lines), the main episodes deal with: Kanikei taking Semetey and fleeing to Bukhara; Semetey’s childhood and his heroic deeds, his return to Talas; his marriage to Aichurok; his fight against Kongurbai; and his death (or mysterious disappearance). The episodes in the third part (9488 lines) relate to: destruction of Semetey’s family, and capture of Aichuerok and Kulchoro; Seitek
growing up; fighting against the internal enemies; Seytek’s marriage: and his defeat of the external enemies and death.

To briefly summarize the background of the tale: Manas is a hero of supernatural strength who unites the forty clans of Kyrgyzstan against their enemies, the Uyghers, to build a Kyrgyz state. At the time, in the early 9th century AD, the Uyghers held one of the world's great empires spanning much of Central Asia (including Kyrgyzstan), Mongolia, and parts of Russia and China. Manas had a son named Semetey and a grandson named Seytek, and their eventful lives are portrayed in parts two and three of the trilogy.

As the Kyrgyz embrace Manas as their ethnic charter, it is noteworthy to mention that throughout the epic contradictory ideals of women are represented. The position of women in Kyrgyz society in *Manas* does not lead itself easily to analysis. From a close reading of the epic, it is clear that women are presented as the equals of men in warfare, and free to choose the men they marry, and as respected members of the household, especially after they bore sons. Two episodes in *Manas*, that tell of Manas’ wooing of Kanikei and the story of Saikal the Kalmuk warrior-maiden, point to the ambiguity to their status. Before being slain in the triumphant final battle, Manas marries the wise Kanykei, daughter of a Temir Khan of Tajik, i.e., Samarkand khan. Her name was Sanirabiga, but people renamed Kanikey because her name was hard to pronounce.

The female figure of Kanikey, the wife of Manas, is deeply revered among the Kyrgyz as the epitome of a good wife—she is wise, strong, and clever. Kanikey reflects the individual independence and powerful family position that historical sources have often attributed to Kyrgyz women. Kyrgyz woman must be a faithful wife to her husband as Kanikei to Manas; bear him male heirs, as Chiyirdi bears Manas to Jakibbai; and look after his domestic welfare, as Chiyirdi and Kanikei. Bazgoz feels that “Kanikei represents the image of an affectionate mother, of a wise spouse who advises her husband on important matters and of a great fighter who rules and defends the kingdom in the absence of her husband” [8]. The Kyrgyz war veteran Koshoi, who was so ready with imprecations for his wife, overwhelms Manas’ wife Kanikei with praise when she presents him with a pair of well-made breeches. Kanikei, then, is represented as the “ideal woman of the steppe; loyal, gracious, hospitable, a skilled cook and doctor, a woman of the highest honour and culture according to the standards of the milieu in which she figures” [9].

The episode of Saikal, the Kalmuk Warrior-maiden, seen as an independent plot, presents a curious picture of feminine power, quite incongruous in the patriarchal set up of the epic. In this episode, Saikal challenges the hero Manas himself to a jousting match, and very nearly worsts him. Initially presented to us in the epic as a Kalmuk warrior, it is soon made out that Saikal is a beautiful maiden of seventeen, with boundless courage and strength. Interestingly, Nazaroff mentions a custom prevalent among the Kyrgyz of the steppes, that is perhaps an echo from *Manas*. According to this custom, “All the young folk in the community mount their horses; the fastest is given to the prettiest girl, together with a good thick whip. They then start galloping like mad. The game is for the young men to catch the girl and give her a kiss, while she gallops as fast as she can to escape, and...defends herself with her whip,...victory does
not go necessarily to the man with the stoutest heart or swiftest horse” [10]. Such is Saikal’s valour that she almost overcomes Manas in the mutch, even wounding him sorely. Manas jousts with her as unrestrainedly as if she were a man; his longing subdue her is not fulfilled, for they come off equal.

Nazaroff has written in great details about position of women in Kyrgyz society, which he says: “has remained unaltered through the ages as it was in antiquity,…Islam has not affected it” [11]. According to him, “a Kyrgyz girl enjoys absolute liberty up to the time of her marriage.” [12] The prospective bridegroom has no claim upon the favours of his fiancée. Bride-price, or ‘kalym’ was very high among the Kyrgyz. In the epic, Manas has to pay a colossal bride-price for Kanikei:

_Sixty camels give to us
Thirty males there must be thus
Thirty females must be as well,
Sixty together...
Heads all black, and bodies all white-
He demanded five hundred steeds!
Different colours of coats and tails,
On the nose-bridge-polished bare weals,
On their foreheads a bold white star,
Bodies as black and shiny as tar...

Fifty black cows then he asked
...
Still for fifty more oxen he asked,
...
Twenty-five skewbalds, red-spotted those,
Twenty-five skewbalds, black-dotted those,
Forty in all he demanded then
Afterwards sheeps...
Thousands black, and thousand white
...
Forty thousand gold dilde,
And two slaves he demanded that day.” [13]

Jakib’s incredible wealth and the goodwill of all Kyrgyz people enable Manas to meet his father-in-law’s demands. Manas is then happily married to Kanikei.

By contrast, the epic also depicts a less appealing role assigned to Kyrgyz women, as being slaves, milkmaids, and the human rewards given to victorious warriors. Lines tell of the exploitation of young girls after a raid of a neighboring tribe, "I shall seize girls with their companions, and shall revel to my heart's content!" [14]. Women are likened to animals being hunted: "Kosoy entered her yurt. Inside, bunched together like withies, young beauties had glided in - flirting themselves like titmice maidens were gathered together" [15]. Upon interviewing both men and women regarding the epic's depiction of women, many explained that the poem is a reflection of a historical imagination, and not to be taken literally. For women, it may be the epic's depiction of the wise, brave and independent women of the steppe, such
as Kanîkey, the hero's best-loved wife. For others, Manas is a symbol of love of the land, of freedom, national independence and interethnic unity.

Bakai is a relative of Manas from the paternal side, his councilor and educator. He embodies the conceptions of the Kyrgyz on wisdom, justice, reason and cordiality of human beings.

“He finds the eyes (i.e. the way) in the darkness
And the right word (i.e. the decision) in a hopeless situation.”

Almambet, owing to his knowledge and his heroic courage, has no equal with regards to physical power among the positive heroes of the epic. The son of a well-known Chinese Khan, he is the nearest companion of Manas, his milk brother:

“He finds the eyes (i.e. the way) in the darkness
And the right word (i.e. the decision) in a hopeless situation.”

Almambet experienced a tragic fate. He was forced to leave his folk and live as a poor, homeless refugee without support of his tribe. Therefore – also when the Kyrgyz revere him – he often bemoans his fate of a homeless person, by saying:

“Those, that have their own tribe, seem to be courageous
All their words seem to be in place.”

Even when faithfully serving the Kyrgyz folk, he never forgot his homeland.

Koshoi is regarded as a holy man by the folk because of his wisdom. He is estimated as a human, whose

“Benediction enriches the folk.”

Even Manas’ son Semetei was born owing to his benediction. Only he possesses the right to judge Manas’ faults and to abash him for his failure.

“His ears are like the shield,
And the eyes sparkle like the Venus.”

“He is the head of the tribe recognized by all.”

“Father of the nation – hero Koshoi.”

When the Kyrgyz were shattered and scattered, he did not have his tribe enslaved by the enemies and continued to fight, until the Kyrgyz with Manas in the lead returned. In the epic the knight Chubak is characterized as a more confidential, more naive, more honest and calmer human being, whom “nobody can master; even the teeth of the lion cannot bite him.”

In addition “his clothes from blue rep, he rides on a grey motley runner”:

“Sometimes Chubak however is rough and hot tempered.”

The young knight Syrgak is the favorite of the whole nation. He distinguishes himself from the other knights by humanity, politeness, goodnaturedness, integrity and the depth of his feelings.

“It is easy for the horse,
Does not drowse, is awake on the way,
It carries a Jeke-belt,
When the enemy comes that is seventy-thousand men strong,
It attacks them unbuttoned.”

Among the positive acting persons of the epic the following are yet to be mentioned: the leader of the Kyrk Choros Kyrgyl and the astute Serek, who can give
“sixty reasonable pieces of advice, until the fallen horse stands up”; the eloquent Ajybai, who

“Mastered sixty different languages and always was quick witted”

and Toshtok, whom even Manas admired and called ‘Tүрү’ (Lord).

In the epic all negative characteristics impersonate in the ‘kan zhyttangan’
(smelling after blood) Chinese Konurbai:

“He has a straight nose; the eyes are blood-shot,
The chest is broad and the hands are powerful.
The eye sockets are deep; the speeches are terrible.
He is high of stature. Like that is the Khan,
That is called Konurbai.”

Ugly features and infamous acts also distinguish the second most powerful
knight after Konurbai in the camp of the enemies, the Kalmyk ‘dan zhyttangan’
(smelling after grain, i.e. gluttonous) Khan Joloy.

Nonetheless, Manas is the only person among the Kyrgyz who has ever carried
the mane- according to Kyrgyz tradition, the greatest tribute his people could pay. For
the Kyrgyz people, then, Manas is more than a legend: He is a historical ruler who put
the Kyrgyz tribes on the map. Along the way, the epic detours through colorful
descriptions of everyday life with its traditions, customs, feasts and funerals.

Manas is said to have been buried in the Ala Too mountains in Talas oblast in
northwestern Kyrgyzstan (Talas Alatau). A mausoleum some 40 km east of the town of
Talas is believed to house his remains and is a popular destination for Kyrgyz travelers.
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 building, known as
"Manastin Khumbuzu" or "The Ghumbez of Manas," was probably erected in 1334.

Manas was and is recited by professional bards. Originally, they were known as
jomokchu (from the Kyrgyz jomok, fairy tale). Kyrgyz epic poem "Manas", a three-part
tale preserved over many centuries by wandering bards called "manaschi" (from the
title: Manas). They consider their job a religious calling and many have elaborate tales
of how they were "touched by Manas" and became able to recite the poetic tale for
hour upon hour and keep their audience enthralled. However, the manaschi are also
expected to improvise if they are to be remembered as "masters" of their art. They
embellish the story with extra description and explanation, and even answer questions
from the audience without breaking their poetic structure. Elements of the orally-
transmitted Manas legend began to assume written form by the 16th century.

The great epic Manas remains potent and pertinent in Kyrgyzstan for many
reasons. Kyrgyzstan still sees itself as divided into those same forty tribes. The
official flag of the republic bears a sun with forty rays pointing a single yurt, the
traditional domestic architecture of Kyrgyzstan.

UNESCO recognized the poem Manas as a world heritage treasure because
Manas has its place in the cultural treasury of humanity along with such masterpieces
as the Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, the Indian Mahābhārata, the Egyptian Hilaliyya.
The epic is also a part of the Turkic dastan, a genre of oral history among tribal groups of Central Asia which served as a primary vehicle to disseminate their history, values, customs, and ethnic identity to younger generations. The vast panorama of the Manas is for the Kyrgyz people the clearly discernible origin of their traditions and culture. Therefore it is an essential part of the world cultural heritage.

**SUMMARY**

History shows how the Kyrgyz people has passed a unique way of its development, preserving its original spiritual and cultural heritage. Despite all the difficulties, such as the defeat of the great Kyrgyz khanates, the destruction of most of the population, the Kyrgyz were able to assert themselves, showing their national spirit, unity and independence of the state system, while not losing their genetic memory. The epic Manas occupies a special place in the rich oral folk art of the Kyrgyz people, which reflects the entire historical path of the Kyrgyz people and is considered to be the “encyclopedia of the life of the Kyrgyz people”.

We are proud that the epic Manas as a great spiritual heritage of the past of the Kyrgyz people, occupies a worthy place among the rich intangible world cultural heritage.

In the context of globalization, the epic Manas is becoming increasingly important as an ideologically unifying factor of Kyrgyz identity and independence in the post-Soviet period.

**Keywords:** spiritual heritage, epic Manas, Kyrgyz identity, national spirit, state structure, genetic memory, Manaschi, biographical cycle of three generations of
epic heroes, intertribal and interethnic battles and victories, traditional domestic architecture of Kyrgyzstan.

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