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### ***Manas*, a twofold tradition**

(Dissertation abstract)

The epic *Manas* is considered to be the archetype or, at least, one of the main emblem of Kyrgyzstan, of Kyrgyz people and their culture. If we are looking through touristic books, or if we are talking with some locals, we can observe that this topic is resumed by some commonplaces such as “Manas is the biggest epic in the world”, “Manas is 1000 years old”, “Bards can memorize half a million verses and recite for days and days”.

It is not the purpose here to criticize such sayings, if not, by the way, to underline their inaccuracy. The first two statements deals with the XX<sup>th</sup> century, one from the Soviet Union period and refers expressly to the printed version of Sаяqбай Karala Uulu (1894-1971); the other one, the celebration of “Manas 1000”, an idea which was already around since Soviet times, stood in 1995 under the first President Askar Akayev. The last one refers to some beliefs that the recitation is only a process of memorization, especially of Sаяqбай’s version, which should take days and days to be told from beginning to end, in a state of transe.

#### **What do those sayings reveal?**

*Manas* has passed through three steps which have changed its shape and perception or interpretation. During Soviet times, *Manas* was largely recorded and published by the work of folklorists, either Kyrgyz or Russian, and the largest versions of Sаяqбай and Sagimbay Orozbekov (1867-1930), among others, became canonical, or classical versions, because of their size, amount of details and the talent of these *manasči* (the bard devoted to the recitation of *Manas*).

In 1995, the celebration of “Manas 1000” inscribed the epic, and the character on which it is based, on the History time. Moreover, as we can read on several academic papers, the epic spearheaded the Kyrgyz nationalism and State ideology.

The last step has begun in 2009. Indeed, *Manas* was inscribed on the UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by China, on behalf of its Kyrgyz minority. Even if the effects of the previous periods were still latent, the epic knew a political and cultural reactivation at this moment: a decree on Introducing educational course on Epic Trilogy in higher educational institutions and all secondary schools; a law “On Epic Trilogy” and a “National Program for

safeguarding, research, and popularization of the Epic Trilogy” were approved between 2010 and 2012. In 2013, as a result, the trilogy *Manas*, *Semetey*, *Seytek* was inscribed in the same list. *Manas* really entered an internationalized step.

### **What is *Manas*?**

Beyond any political or ideological discourses, what we can say about *Manas* today is that it’s a twofold tradition: the very root of *Manas* is to be told, recited, orally by *manasči* during specific occasions or events. Then, a more recent aspect, let’s say, tradition has appeared: the written or editing tradition of *Manas*.

It is a common phenomenon for epics, all around the world, to be stuck on a written form while the oral tradition is dying out. This is the original point of *Manas* to be still a living oral tradition, in a modern context (global economy, technology and so on), performed by *manasči* from 8 to 80 years old – while pupils and students learn *Manas* from books on school bench.

### **How the epic adapts, or is adapted, to this modern context?**

This is the main question of my work. From the last step mentioned above, we can observe the creation of several *Manas aytuu* (recitation of *Manas*) in Kyrgyzstan. Those events gather all if not most of the *manasči* of the country. They take turns telling an episode of their choice, in their own way, in the scope of time they need. Those events, standing halfway through competition and spectacle, seem to be of a new genre.

I think that from the observation of those events we can catch several key elements.

First of all, we are allowed to scrutinize a microcosm at work: the *aytuu* looks like a feast where a bard is singing a tale before an audience: in a *boz-üi* (yurt) richly decorated, everyone sits in a determined place (men on the left, the bard opposite the entry, women on the right). A classical repartition of sex, status and functions of persons and places is at play. Ritual aspects like *alastoo* (fumigations) happens from time to time.

This is, so, an opportunity to check the famous interactions between the bard and the audience. We should assert, in this case, that the audience is not a block but composed of several persons, of different status, who are gathered in the same place for the same event – but with different purposes. According to the first travellers or witnesses who wandered the area, those interactions seems to be strong, vivid between the bard and its audience. Now, attitudes have changed the way to interact with the bard, or merely the way to listen to him or to feel the recitation: do people attend a play in a theatre? How do they act during an *aytuu*?

Then, during this recitation, we can remark the wide age difference between *manasči*, from 8 to more than 80 years old. Differences arise when comparing the episodes, the rhythms and their variations, the gestures, and sometimes the access to another state of mind. It seems that young are more on a *by heart* recitation and that more the *manasči* is aged, more its style is both unbound and mastered.

In that case, we have to test the following hypothesis – in which extent the written tradition is sustaining or influence the oral one, first in the learning and knowledge process of the *manasči*, then during the recitation step?

My stay in Kyrgyzstan, under the aegis of the American University of Central Asia, aims to find elements which will allow me to bring new elements to our understanding of *Manas*, in particular, and of the epic world in general.