

“The Spirit of Manas Lives” The Importance of the Manas Epic for the Formation of the Nation of Kyrgyzstan

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The “dismissal” into independence

In the course of the dissolution of the USSR, on August 31, 1991, the former partial Kyrgyz republic announced its independence and became a nation-state.¹ The new republic, however, was not created through a revolution or a liberation struggle against a colonial power but rather became independent through a “dismissal process”. Strictly speaking, the “burden of independence” (Mangott 1996: 65) was imposed.²

Kyrgyzstan, once part of a world power, was faced with the task of consolidating itself and finding its own position inside the new nation and for the outside world. Ways to social integration and the creation of a nation-state identity had to be found to fill the identity gap and the absence of a sense of national consciousness. With the collapse of the USSR, a decades-long standing framework broke down. In order to secure stability in times of transformations and crisis, a plausible ideology with reliable powers of integration is needed.

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² In the course of a referendum on March 17, 1991, still 94.5% of Kyrgyz citizens expressed their wish to remain with a renewed socialist Soviet Union (Trutanow 1994: 213).

During Soviet times, Kyrgyzstan belonged to the underdeveloped union republics, especially with regard to its infrastructure, industrialization, and the public health system (Götz/Halbach 1996: 209). Its political and economic needs make Kyrgyzstan today one of the structurally most unstable of the Central Asian states. The existing social fragmentation shows itself in regional, tribal and inter-ethnic conflicts because, beside the Kyrgyz, members of more than 80 ethnic or religious groups live in the titular nation.³ 75% of the population is Muslim, 20% Russian-Orthodox and 5% are members of other religions.⁴

The situation at the dismissal into independence therefore was not simple. The national rebirth of the linguistic and cultural identity was not only a key issue among the Kyrgyz population but also among many minorities. The constitution of an integrating “ideology” consequently became a national balancing act (Straube 2003: 291f).

The multi-ethnic situation, fueled by nationalistic propaganda, had already led to problems in the summer of 1990. In the area around Oş, in the southern Ferghana valley, which is populated by Kyrgyz, Tajiks and a large Uzbek minority, bloody confrontations resulting from the distribution of land near Uzgen took place. These escalated into a pogrom against the Uzbek minority and came to a halt only through military intervention (Tabišalijeva 1999: 21; Tishkov 1995: 134f).

In Kyrgyzstan, the question arises as to how far national identity and ethnic heterogeneity allow for a peaceful coexistence. Already in 1993, the “Republic of Kyrgyzstan” was renamed “Kyrgyz Republic”, a nominal start for establishing ethnic priorities. Indeed, President Askar Akaev propagated his concept of a “State of the Kyrgyz” in January 1994 under the guiding principle: “Kyrgyzstan – our common house” (Akaev 1995a: 91f). He emphasized that all groups in the country have a common history, and insisted on speaking of the “people of Kyrgyzstan” and not the “peoples of Kyrgyzstan”, stressing that this is in the spirit of the new constitution and, moreover, politically, historically and morally correct. In order to ensure inter-ethnic and national harmony, an “Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan” was founded to protect the national interests of the different ethnic groups and to provide solidarity among the peoples of the Kyrgyz Republic (Elebaeva 1999: 190). The “Assambleja” – according to the model of an ethno-cultural self-administration prescribed by the state – is essentially an instrument for the prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts. 28 national culture centers

³ A nation is defined as “titular” when its name is derived from the “people” in the numerical majority.

⁴ Of the 4,822,938 persons living in Kyrgyzstan in 1999, 64.9% were Kyrgyz, 13.8% Uzbeks, 12.5% Russians, 1.1% Dungans, 1% Ukrainians, 1% Uigurs, 9% Tatars, 9% Tajiks, 7% “Turkish”, 4% of German origin, 4% Korean and 1.5% other ethnic groups (National Statistical Committee 2000: 26).

which offer language and cultural education were opened. In fact, however, an increase in ethnification of the nation-state can be observed. In all areas of public life, Kyrgyz patriotism and a trend to “ethnocracy” and “Kyrgyzization” are increasingly noticeable and lead to the exclusion from important positions of members of other ethnicities.

The current demographic circumstances are the result of Soviet settlement policies aimed at the assimilation of different nationalities. According to these policies, which also included plans for language and education, after the October Revolution the Soviet nation was to proceed in three phases: The different cultures and ethnic groups were first to “flourish”, and then “become close to each other”, and finally to “merge” into a single nation. In 1971 the process was declared completed and the ethnic question resolved (Von Gumpfenberg 2002: 29f). Actually, however, the problems of living together had not been resolved. Despite, or because of, the forced assimilation of different ethnicities in Central Asia over decades, the inter-ethnic, socio-cultural and economic chasms had been deepened. Not a multi-cultural but a bi-cultural society existed in Kyrgyzstan. The conflict lines ran not primarily between Kyrgyz and Russians but between urban and rural, between Russian, “Russified” and less “Russified”, between educated and uneducated, richer and poorer, privileged and less privileged segments of the population.

Also, with regard to the “language question”, the state has to perform a balancing act. The legislation on the statuses of the Russian and Kyrgyz languages is among the most disputed controversies in the country. With the end of the Soviet Union, the non-titular ethnic groups feared a loss of their privileges and positions, which caused a strong exodus, particularly between 1990 and 1994 (Landau/Kellner-Heinkele 2001: 27). This was also influenced by the 1989 law that made Kyrgyz the official state language, and by the occurrences in Uzgen and the deteriorating economic situation.

Organizations, government institutions and the educational sector were expected to complete the transition to Kyrgyz as the state language by January 5, 1998 (Elebaeva 1999: 183; Anderson 1999: 45). The non-Kyrgyz were to learn Kyrgyz. The high migration rate of the non-Kyrgyz population, however, had a very negative influence on the economy of the country, leading to a temporary postponement of the “language question”. Surprisingly, in May 2000, Kyrgyzstan was declared a bilingual state. The legislation which, besides Kyrgyz, now acknowledged Russian as an “official language”, was supposed to represent a step toward a society open to *all* Kyrgyz, independent of their ethnicity. This decree, however, is qualified by another regulation that encourages Kyrgyz from Afghanistan to settle in Kyrgyzstan, making it clear that Kyrgyzstan sees itself as the homeland of all Kyrgyz (Megoran 2000).

The question of whether the titular nation emphasizes the creation of a Kyrgyz identity or an identity of Kyrgyzstan can be examined by looking at the my-

tho-poetic and political way the *Manas* epic⁵ has been adopted for the construction of a nation-state ideology.

The Manas epic

Since the collapse of the USSR, many of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia have discovered the use of epics for political purposes. Until independence, the *Manas* epic, which was handed down only orally until 1858, belonged strictly to the realm of literature. After 1991 the epos became a symbol of national unity, meant to serve the consolidation of peoples and nationalities assembled in a sovereign, democratic state. The resultant ideological vacuum was supposed to be filled with values from the *Manas* epic to allow the rebirth of an identity based on myths of the past. President Akaev made the *Manas* memorial cult a personal priority. *Manasologists*, Kyrgyz scientists who research the epic, support him.

Approximately 10 months after the declaration of independence, on June 26, 1992, the parliament passed a mandate on the short and long term – beyond the year 2000 – strategic use of the epic for the development of a new nation state ideology (Kumar 1998: 17). The epic was to be embedded in history through a millennial celebration in 1995 and the erection of historic memorials. Studies about Kyrgyz history were to be publicized; literature, art, theater, music and movies about the *Manas* epic were to be produced for the population.

Today the *Manas* epic is projected to the world as an essential component of Kyrgyz identity and nationality. The epic is represented as the “spiritual treasury” of the Kyrgyz culture. For President Askar Akaev, it is *the* Kyrgyz contribution to world culture. The epic is considered as a foundation that supports several pillars of identity. The epic is used for the revitalization and enrichment of the language, for the recollection of pre-colonial traditions and for the retrieval of one’s own ethnic history, i.e. to support the “re-Kyrgyzization” of the Kyrgyz. The epic contains, according to popular opinion, ideas of freedom and patriotism, of unity, humanism and independence. It is supposed to serve the moral education of all Kyrgyz, especially the young.

Today, the epic offers help against external and internal enemies: against the disintegration of traditions such as hospitality and respect for one’s elders, against alcohol and drug problems, against tribalism, nepotism and corruption. According to Akaev, it demonstrates that greed and envy do not lead people to do good deeds (Akaev 1997b: 105f). When denouncing economic crime in 1995, Akaev warned that “*the spirit of Manas won’t forgive*” (Akaev 1995b: 159).

What is the epic about? *Manas*, according to Mussajew (1994: 176), deals with a history full of change and with the union of the Kyrgyz clans in their constant

⁵ I have italicized *Manas* when referring to the epic. When the hero is meant, standard writing is used.

fight against hostile neighbors. The epic personalizes this over three generations of the careers and fates of famous leaders. In the center are Manas, his son Semetej, and Semetej's son Sejtej. The number of additional characters, the length, content and sequence of the different episodes vary. The epic, written in verse form, consists of mythical, legend-like and historic episodes. It is recited by bards.

Čokan Valichanov (1835-1865), a Kazakh scientist, came in contact with a Kyrgyz bard in 1856. He was followed by the pioneer of Turkic language studies, W. W. Radloff (V. V. Radlov, 1837-1918), a German-born Russian linguist. In 1862 and 1869 Radloff undertook two expeditions in Kyrgyzstan to examine these languages. As the second "chronicler", he recorded stanzas of the epic. Until the beginning of the Soviet era, no other records of the epic are known. Only during the last decades, has *Manas* been collected in a systematic manner. In 1995, 65 variations of the three parts of the *Manas* epic were available in the Academy of Sciences in Biškek and in the archives in Leningrad (Mussajew 1994: 176, 213).

In its early form, the epic was not in chronological order. It initially became compiled "as a whole" by the bard Sagimbaj Orozbekov (1867-1930). He structured it, beginning with the birth of Manas (Prior 2000: 20). Everyone in Kyrgyzstan knows this epic. That each Kyrgyz is able to recite at least some verses, however, is contrary to my experience.

The content of the epic and the way it is interpreted and dealt with reflect ruling ideologies such as nationalism, Pan-Turkism, Pan-Islamism and communism, and, of course, also Soviet policies toward minority nationalities. The use of the epic for political purposes has also changed correspondingly. In 1861, Valichanov therefore called the epic "the Iliad of the steppe". This assessment supported the Soviet leadership's policies toward nationalities in the middle of the 1920s. At that time, it was still deemed desirable for all Soviet peoples to have a characteristic cultural asset at their disposal (Prior 2000: 7). A revaluation of *Manas* took place, turning the epic into a world epic. Folklore was regarded as the people's valuable heritage that was passed on orally and *unchanged* from one generation to the next. From 1930 onwards, *Manas*, like the other grand epics of the Turkic peoples, was considered by the Soviets as a reactionary cultural product. Those who recorded the epics, like Kasim Tinistanov (1901-1938), were persecuted. The years 1945 to 1947, on the other hand, are regarded as the liberal phase in the politics of nationalities. *Manas* once again became a symbol of Kyrgyz cultural politics. In 1946, a lavishly designed Russian edition of the epic appeared. As a result of the "anti-epic wave" starting in 1951, *Manas* was removed from circulation (Prior 2000: 33f). Consequently one could speak of "epic politics"⁶, "politics with the epic" that were applied and adjusted according to pre-

⁶ Prior (2000) analyzes the history of the reception of *Manas* during the Soviet era. He relies on Abdykarov/Džumaliev (1995), the archived material from 1925 through 1995, governmental decisions, party documents, speeches, etc. and the political actions (including those of the Kyrgyz Communist Party) related to the Kyrgyz epics.

vailing ideological demands. *Manas* was valued, de-valued, suppressed or only selectively published.

The academic examination of epics or oral traditions requires attention be paid to the story tellers themselves in order to take into consideration the mnemonic methods, as well as to modifications made during recitations, to problems with translation, to literalization, etc. (Duchâteau 1988: 351; Vansina 1985). These are aspects that hardly play a role for the local interpretations of the *Manas* epic in Kyrgyzstan. In contrast, examinations by Western scientists (for example the Turkologist A. Hatto) are rejected as “ideological” (Mussajew 1994: 93f).

Many factors influence the rendering of the epic material: the conditions at its writing, perhaps the relationship between bards and chroniclers, as well as current political objectives and areas of interest (Hatto 1990; Prior 2000).⁷ Thus – according to Radloff – a bard might praise *Manas* as a friend of the Russian emperor and of the Russian people (Radloff 1965: xiv). He praises *Manas* as a defender of Islam (ibid.: xi). In the Sagimbaj version, *Manas* is even depicted as a pilgrim to Mecca (Mussajew 1994: 222). Today, the two-volume *Manas* encyclopedia⁸ published in 1995 claims that *Manas* possesses, like other leaders of significant groups, extraordinary gifts which allow him to appear as a messenger of heaven. Even his name points to a divine origin. He is depicted as the son of God, as if created by light, emerging from the figure of the Sun God, or perhaps *Manas* himself is the moon, the sun or her son (*Manas Entsiklopediya* 1995 (1): 402f). These motifs can also be found in other procreation myths.⁹

Numerous central themes of the *Manas* epic are found in Siberian and Central Asian epics, such as the tale of an older, childless married couple that had to wait a long time for offspring (*Manas Entsiklopediya* 1995 (1): 402). According to a popular belief, *Manas*' mother became pregnant after, in a dream, she ate an apple that had a “parthenogenic” effect (Hatto 1990: 401). A pregnant woman's craving the heart of a tiger, also a widespread belief, indicates an outstanding personality for the future child (Mussajew 1995: 41). Miraculous events and signs before the birth, such as announcements in dreams and messages from heaven, point to the child's high potential that is then later confirmed by his exceptional talents, intelligence, courage and skills, his successes and heroic deeds.

Additionally, the narratives describing *Manas*' path to heroism contain material known in other regions and religions.¹⁰ A group of 40 loyal men from various tribes who treat each other like brothers and who distinguished themselves

⁷ Prior (2000) calls this triangular relationship “patron, party and patrimony”.

⁸ Kariškulov, A. 1995. *Manas Entsiklopediya*. Vol. 1 and 2.

⁹ Cf. Neumann-Hoditz (1995: 21f.), among others, regarding the fathering of the forebear of Činggis Xan in the document “The Secret History of the Mongols.”

¹⁰ Similarly, oral traditions served to idealize the empire's founder Timur Lenk (1336-1405), who is celebrated in present-day Uzbekistan for his uniting and integrating capacities (Schmitz 1997: 49f)

through strength in battle and loyalty to Manas, form an egalitarian community of shared destiny. Among them are also older, wise men who behave like “fathers” toward Manas. They represent his “new family”, replacing the old, thus creating the image of a “quasi-patrilineal family” (Müller 2003a: 28f). Manas is supposed to have moved with his “40 warriors” into the Ala-Too mountains in order to lead the Kyrgyz people back into the “land of their ancestors” (Mussa-jew 1995: 71). Today, Manas is depicted as the father of the Kyrgyz state. As President Askar Akaev commented:

More than 1000 years ago, ancestors led by Manas founded a Kyrgyz state (...). For various reasons listed in Manas, the state was destroyed. During the following 1000 years, the Kyrgyz were unable to unite and create a state because they were scattered in all directions (...). Today, after 1000 years, the Kyrgyz have received their independence. It is the second attempt in their history to create a free nation. It means that the dying embers of Manas’ fire have reignited. (Akaev 1997: 88)

The reunification then became the creative beginning phase. With the repatriation to the native country, with a firm hand and divine assistance, the hero achieved a new order out of chaos. Through his actions – repatriation and founding of the state – Manas becomes the savior of the Kyrgyz people.

1991 also emerges as a turning point for a new order that was to occur by referring back to its origins. Since Manas had created a state under comparable conditions, the Kyrgyz people could, according to Akaev, view his deeds as a model. Manas could help with important questions such as regulations regarding the journey through life and its directions (Akaev 1997b: 105f).

Today, the epic hero Manas is projected as the Kyrgyz founding father who is distinguished by special qualities, by age, ancestry, and continuity. Taking recourse to such principles of seniority and authority (Müller 2003: 23) provides the foundation for social hierarchies and with it, the supremacy of the Kyrgyz people.

The idea that present-day Kyrgyzstan was the ancestral home of the Kyrgyz, and that the Kyrgyz as an independent people therefore should lead the titular nation is derived directly from the epic by the President and the *Manasologists*. The Kyrgyz are said not only to represent the numerical majority but, as their story documented in the epic also shows, to have had the ability to integrate others. It is said that Manas not only peacefully united members of the different Kyrgyz clans, but also those that were conquered.

Today, Akaev positions the contemporary Kyrgyz people and himself as the successors of Manas (Akaev 1997b: 105f). By referring to Manas and by representing himself as the executor of Manas’ legacy, Akaev also legitimizes his presidency. Like Manas, Akaev sees it as his civilizing mission to introduce democracy. Akaev, as legitimate heir and successor of Manas, becomes himself the savior of the Kyrgyz, and the guarantor of democracy: Manas united, Akaev united. As a charismatic leader, he resembles Manas.

The millennium celebration

Western scholars have already pointed out the difficulties of dating Kyrgyz epics (Prior 2000: 1). Some Kyrgyz researchers attribute an age of 2500 to 3000 years to the *Manas* epic (Atamamedov/Orazov 1995: 7). One of the most popular views is that the epic is 1000 years old.

Plans for the 1000-year celebration of the *Manas* epic existed as early as 1947. The source for the dating, according to Prior (2000: 30f), was an eleven-line, Old Turkish rune inscription found on a tombstone in Mongolia in 1909 on which the year 847 A.D. was recorded. Ramstedt, its discoverer, deciphered the inscription. Since the name of a person mentioned on the stele contained the word *kan*, Bernštam (1910-1956) later concluded that this could refer to “Manas Khan”. Between 1942 and 1946, Bernštam argued in 15 articles the thesis that the inscription makes reference to the *Manas* epic. The Kyrgyz author Tschingis Aitmatow seized the opportunity to propose a *Manas* memorial celebration for which he lobbied during three successive congresses of the Communist party between 1976 and 1986.

After achieving independence, the notion of a national memorial service re-awakened. On the basis of the “arithmetic mentality” (Burke 1999: 97), which leads to the preference of round numbers for celebrations and the staging of “holy years”, after 1991, Aitmatow pushed for the appealing number 1000. He wanted to direct international attention to Kyrgyzstan through a resurgence of Kyrgyz spiritual heritage, demonstrated through celebrations. The year 1995 was declared the “year of national remembrance” (Kumar 1998: 7). The dates for the celebration – August 25th to 30th, 1995 – were, critics today agree, cleverly chosen because shortly thereafter the presidential elections were to take place.

The celebration was based on the proven principle of mimetic representation (Müller 1999: 82). The Kyrgyz tried to place their history, how they wished themselves to be seen, as effectively into the picture as possible. History, it was suggested, should be celebrated communally, and the example of *Manas* should point to the future and create a common identity. The event not only represented “the proof of one’s ancient tradition and an uninterrupted continuity of development but also the integration into ‘world history’” (Müller 1995: 17). UNESCO participated and leading foreign representatives were invited. The staging of the celebration, with its many folkloristic elements and its aim for authenticity, aspired to gain the interest of the global political audience.

With these celebrations, the nation tried not only to place itself into a time-frame, but also to locate itself spatially, since space is an additional component of identity. Monuments were meant to constitute and represent the nation historically and culturally (Tacke 1995: 16). In addition to the preparations for the celebration and in accordance with the edict, historical sites filled with memorabilia were erected. Local examples were meant to serve factuality and establish

authenticity because an event based on a legend without a spatial anchor loses significance. Per a 1992-decree giving the people the ability to visualize the epic, a village was erected near the capital city of Biškek, featuring an architectural “ethnographic memorial complex *Manas Ajili*” to be used for festivities, exhibitions, and to provide tourist appeal (Kumar 1998: 18). Together with this re-enacted ancestral village, a *Manas* memorial site was dedicated during the festival near the city of Talas in western Kyrgyzstan. Both were meant to serve as “commemoration sites” of a political, republican, but also a unified, constitutional Kyrgyz state. Certain variations of the epic from the 19th century locate the “seat of power of *Manas*” (Hatto 1990: 3) in the Talas valley, approximately 400 kilometers west of the capital. Localizing a specific place, where, evidently, decisions were once made, acted to reinforce the “occurrences of that time”. This sacred memorial place, along with a mausoleum from the 14th century, was to serve as a pilgrimage site in remembrance of Manas.

Included in the eternal natural memorials are also an impression of Manas’ foot, the tie-up for his horse, the resting place for the 40 heroes, etc. The complex includes a *Manas* museum where history is objectified by means of the documentation of collected and organized facts with memorabilia such as suits of armor, weapons, etc. serving as conclusive evidence.

While many young Kyrgyz viewed the national staging as something positive, the “Russified” urban Kyrgyz and members of minorities saw it more critically. In their view *Manas* is “ideology”. Much money was spent on the celebration, while unemployment and poverty prevailed.

The seven legacies

For the 1000-year celebration, the President first extracted “three legacies” from the available written variations of the epic and later expanded these to seven. Oral tradition was to be perpetuated. Through the compilation of the legacies, Akaev proved himself not only as a charismatic leader, but also as a “chosen one” with the gift to interpret the *Manas* texts, thereby taking another step in fulfilling his “mission” (Müller 2003b: 272f).

The seven legacies were to become the framework of the national identity. The first legacy demands the “unity of the people”. It warns of fragmentation through regional, tribal and ethnic separatism (Akaev 1997a: 6). The second, “international solidarity, friendship and cooperation” (ibid.: 30), concerns the friendship between ethnicities and nations. In the third, “national honor and civic pride” reminded Akaev of *Manas* and those whose honor it was to die for the people, and urged engagement in the development of the country (ibid.: 42). The fourth legacy commanded “working tirelessly” (ibid.: 52). With the fifth, Akaev calls for “humanism, generosity and forgiveness” (ibid.: 68). The sixth legacy urged “living in harmony with nature” (ibid.: 76). In the seventh legacy,

Akaev appeals for strengthening the Kyrgyz state and “guarding it jealously” (ibid.: 88).

Several institutions, among them the presidential palace itself, issued *Manas* programs to pre-schools, schools and universities, evidence of how methodically and didactically the epic was to be communicated. Instruction was intended to achieve historical awareness and cultural identity. A picture of Manas and the “mottoes of the legacies” decorate the lobbies of many Kyrgyz schools. Here, and in universities where Kyrgyz is the language of instruction, “*Manas* programs” are introduced, seldom, however, at Russian-medium institutions.

In his justification of the legacies, Akaev presents himself, like many other leaders of post-colonial states, as someone who was not interested in emulating the Europeans, but rather chose to call upon his “own origins” in order to successfully effect changes and a new beginning.¹¹ He sees the dramatic collapse at the end of the Soviet era as counterbalanced by “autarchic” and “ancestral Kyrgyz” ideas. *Manasologists* support him:

We did not, as many thought, adopt the idea of freedom, patriotism and independence from Europe or other countries. The ideas and the noble, human values, which are of great importance to all humanity, grew out of Kyrgyz ground. In the course of history, they emerged from the agonizing, painful life experiences of the Ala-Too-Kyrgyz. (Baigasiev 1997: 114f)

Concluding remarks

In Kyrgyzstan, one is concerned with building an operable strategy for creating an identity – to formulate this strategy requires a plausible concept of national consciousness. The current situation is directed back at history. One reverts back to an original myth which corresponds to a superior salvation plan and disseminates it as historical reality. This process is driven by the President, who represents himself as both the founder and nurturer of an old and new nationality. In his speeches, he refers to a Kyrgyz state that was founded more than 1000 years ago. The past – the time 1000 years ago – is the starting point and the reference system for the present and the future. The events of that time are conveyed as key actions with exemplary significance for establishing identity. Thus modern-day problems had already been solved in exemplary fashion by Manas a millennium ago. The newly established order was to become, as the one founded by Manas, an era of salvation. The Kyrgyz consider the oral traditions as “archives” in which memories of “*Manas*-time” are still preserved today. Patriotic bards are entrusted with their delivery. First of all, it was necessary to interpret the ar-

¹¹ C.f. Müller (2003b: 279), who points out examples of African leaders such as Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906-2001), Kenneth David Kaunda (born 1924), Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922-1999).

chives, which the President strove to do through his “seven legacies”. To reinforce the credibility of Manas’ existence, local material documents are produced such as the mausoleum where he is supposedly buried, or the discoveries exhibited in museums. One points to the “tracks” of the hero and his 40 followers, in places of assembly, or his footprints in a rock, as if Manas had erected his own eternal monument himself (Müller 1999: 13). These markers throughout Kyrgyzstan are meant to prove that the Kyrgyz were already living in their current land at that time, and thus that they are autochthonous inhabitants.

Unlike myths, which are supposed to represent sacral and generally unchangeable texts, many ethnologists consider legendary tales, that is, those that report on the feats of ancestors and take place in historic times and well-known locations, as less reliable, indeed “untrue” tales. In principle, such traditions can be modified by anyone (Müller 1995: 12), which also applies to the orally handed down *Manas* epic. Here too, the intentions and ideological backgrounds of the bards and “chronologists” exert influence on the contents and account of the record. For instance, the texts of Sagımbaj Orozbekov (1867-1930), which the Bashkir folklorist Kayum Miftakov (1822-1948 or 1949) took up, show a turn towards a national and pan-Turkish thinking in the epic (Prior 2000: 11f). New in Sagımbaj’s version is the specific use of the term *Türk*. It appears for the first time in the pan-Turkish layout variations, specifically as the ethnonym for *all* Turkic peoples whose homeland is called *Türkistön* (ibid: 15). Consequently, Sagımbaj has nationalized the epic. This may have occurred under the influence of his chronologist, who was a pupil in a Jadidist¹² school which pursued pan-Turkish ideas.

Sagımbaj, for the first time, designated the members of Manas’ tribe as “Kyrgyz” (Hatto 1990: 622). Until then, in keeping with the the Turkic peoples’ tradition of epic heroes, Manas and other central heroes were called Nogay or Nogoij. The term “*Kirgiz*” was seldom used as an ethnonym in epic texts of the mid-19th century. (Hatto 1980: 70; Prior 2000: 15). Western scientists, such as Golden, assume that the ethnonym *Kirgiz* had a political rather than an ethnic function, and that the “modern Kyrgyz” was a creation of the Soviets (Golden 1992: 404f). Dividing lines to other people were hard to draw. Hatto considers it altogether problematic to perceive the epic as “purely” Kyrgyz, and emphasizes that the classification and interpretation of the *Manas* material is very difficult (Hatto 1982: 8).

Conspicuously, as described by Valichanov and Radloff, large discrepancies exist in the routes taken by the Bok Morun, a figure in the epos. Prior, who tested the travel routes, verified that both variations contained only one common toponym: Kopo or Kopu (Prior 1998: 267) – and this despite the fact that

¹² The term Jadidism stands for the reform movement founded by Tatar intellectuals in the 19th century in Kazan. According to Götz and Halbach (1994: 307), Jadidism was an attempt to modernize Islam (especially in the area of formal education) and aimed at emancipating Russian Muslims from colonial rule. On the national level the movement strived to unite the Turk peoples (pan-Turkism).

the names of localities always contained memorization aspects, often with spoken mnemotechnic functions.

In their attempts to make sense of and, at the same time, create and legitimize a national consciousness, Kyrgyzstan officials used strategies which appear to resemble those used in the developing Western European nations around 1800. There too, interest developed in the nation's own heritage, which was to counteract fragmentation. National unity was projected in a supposedly primeval time, from which the nation could emerge as something heaven-sent or a gift of nature. Here too, heroes from earlier times were said to have experienced the "first democracy" (Müller 1995: 12). The "ancient time of the nation" (Stagl 2002: 644f) was thought of as still alive in the tradition of the people. It was the task of the elite to rebuild the national culture thought to have been present originally. Through a "reconnection" to the spiritual world of the ancestors and the reconstruction of one's own spiritual history, a "return" to "pure values" was to be achieved. "National education" faced the fundamental task of conveying the "ancient" values and driving forward the "re-education" of a national character through a new connection with and a new adoption of the "people's heritage". School books, for example, played a significant role in this process (cf. Stagl 1999: 1237).

The process of "nation building" is also viewed in Kyrgyzstan as a "national rebirth" through which the people were to be led back to their roots. The "advanced age of a culture", even when the length of its lifespan is contrived, also creates proven support for ethnic and national identity. Whoever can claim an "older descent" and can prove an unbroken continuity until the present ranks highest. The Kyrgyz represent themselves, therefore, as an autochthonous, quasi "organically" grown community which is historically *unique* and *superior* to the others (Müller 1995: 17). For priority reasons, as also with other founding heroes, the ruler genealogy points to one "God" (Müller 1999: 108), attributing the characteristics of a "savior" to *Manas*.

The *Manasologists* – like the proponents of other national ideologies – depict the Kyrgyz as a community with a common origin and mentality that can serve others as an example by which to orient themselves, and with which others can be expected to connect (Stagl 1999: 1234f). The national unity of the "Kyrgyzstani" is supposed to materialize with the participation of all its inhabitants, but under the guidance of the Kyrgyz people. According to Kyrgyz interpretation, their claim to leadership is undeniable since it is based on an age-old epos which has simply come back to life. With this interpretation of the epic, the exclusion from the post-collapse USSR and the dramatic changes make sense: The turning point constitutes the transition from a gloomy decline to a bright, promising future. Only through this transition is a "revival" of the original state of the Kyrgyz nation and the observance of a paramount, quasi heavenly plan of salvation made possible.

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