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UNESCO Recognizes Kyrgyz Epic of Manas

By Malika Giles

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A statue of the epic hero Manas dominates Ala-Too Square in Bishkek, previously occupied by a statue of Lenin. **Malika Giles**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — UNESCO has added the Kyrgyz Epic of Manas to its "intangible heritage" list.

The epic trilogy narrates the story of Manas and his descendants, Semetey and Seytek, as they battle against their Khitan and Oirat enemies, struggling to unite the disparate tribes of Kyrgyz people into a single nation and reclaim their ancestral lands. The longest recorded version of the trilogy is 553,000 lines long.

It is performed at many public occasions, from village festivals to national holidays. Recitals of the poem can take up to 13 hours, and many Kyrgyz historians claim the poem is the longest oral epic in the world.

The exact origins of the epic are somewhat controversial — Kyrgyz claim that the epic dates to the ninth or 10th century, and the Kyrgyz Republic officially celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Manas in 1995. However, the oldest extant mention of the epic dates back to only 1792, and the epic's plot closely corresponds to political events in the region that occurred during the 17th century, leading many Western historians to claim that the epic was written much later.

Regardless of its exact provenance, Manas has been rapidly embraced as a national hero by the Kyrgyz people and has become an important keystone of national identity since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Once discouraged under communism, the Epic of Manas is now a centerpiece of Kyrgyz culture and literature. A statue of "Magnanimous Manas" occupies the prime position in Bishkek's central Ala-Too square, a site that previously housed a statue of Lenin.

In the early Soviet period, the Manas trilogy was perceived as nationalistic by the authorities, and the poem was excluded from the school curriculum throughout the 1930s. However, the epic continued to retain its central position in collective memory and village life.

Since the end of communism, streets once named after Soviet stalwarts have been renamed after Manas in towns across Kyrgyzstan, as have many public buildings, such as the airport in Bishkek that holds the American airbase. Political speeches often refer to Manas, and the epic's recital at local festivals is often accompanied by the endorsement of public figures.

According to Marlen Solanoey, press secretary at the Ministry of Culture of the Kyrgyz Republic, "the epic" is a unifying force in a nation that is made up of many different tribes, and for this, among other reasons, the trilogy is a historical inheritance, which holds the most important place in the history of Kyrgyz culture."

The use of the epic as a rallying point for national unity is not without parallels in other post-Communist states — in Mongolia, the government has reached back to the memory of Ghengis Khan, erecting monumental statues of the conqueror.

In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev's government has also used traditional culture to rally support amongst the disparate Kazakh clans, though the Kazakhs lack a single national epic like Manas. In Turkmenistan, post-Soviet leaders have created their own cults of personality, rather than relying on traditional figures.

All of the former Soviet states have confronted the difficult issue of national identity, yet the Central Asian states face the additional conundrum of finding national culture outside of Islam — all of the post-Soviet states have discouraged Islamist groups. By rallying around the supposedly pre-Islamic Epic of Manas, the Kyrgyz have found themselves without resorting to religion.

Speaking at the eighth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, UNESCO said the epic trilogy "expressed the historical memory of the Kyrgyz people."

Preparation for the bid for intangible heritage status took two years of research by historians,

archivists and government officials. Speaking after the decision was made, Almazbek Atambayev, President of Kyrgyzstan, declared this "one of the most important events for Kyrgyz culture and society in the years since independence."

Today, the Epic of Manas continues to pass from generation to generation in the traditional way. Performers, called *manaschi*, learn the epic by heart and are generally taught by their grandparents or older relatives. Manaschi are traditionally men, although in recent years women have also started to take on this role.

"The epic is a very rich source for historians across the world," said Omurbek Semurchnov, senior research fellow at the State Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic. "The trilogy does not just include information about the Kyrgyz people, but also about Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, people from Eastern Turkestan, Mongolians, Tibetans and many other nations. The epic also mentions different world religions, including Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity."

"We are very happy about the decision to include the Epic of Manas on the UNESCO list. More resources and more support will be put towards further research, study and dissemination of the epic. In the future, the world will know about the Epic of Manas."

Sixteen other items were registered as UNESCO intangible heritage at the same time as Manas, including the Georgian *Qvevri* system of winemaking, and traditional Mongolian calligraphy.

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