

SINGING THE KYRGYZ  
*MANAS*

SAPARBEK KASMAMBETOV'S RECITATIONS  
OF EPIC POETRY

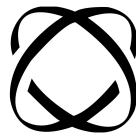


*By*

Keith Howard and Saparbek Kasmambetov

*With*

Razia Sultanova, Gulnara Kasmambetova and Gouljan Arslan



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by Keith Howard and Saparbek Kasmambetov

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Recordings engineered by Jeremy Glasgow, edited by Jeremy Glasgow and  
Keith Howard.

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## PREFACE

Today, the Kyrgyz *Manas* is one of the most celebrated epic heroic poems in the world. At the turn of the new millennium it was appointed a UNESCO ‘Masterpiece in the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’, signalling its global significance. It sits alongside Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the South Asian *Māhābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, although politics and language have during the twentieth century conspired against allowing it to become as well known: while the *Manas* has long been considered important by European and American scholars researching epics, the difficulty of access to Kyrgyz lands during the Soviet period meant that it featured only marginally in the classic works of Milman Parry and Albert Lord.

During the twentieth century, Soviet scholarship celebrated its length, and the compilations of texts from two great bards, Sagımbay Orozbaqov (1867-1930) and Sıyaqbay Qaralaev (1894-1971), were held up in triumph: Sagımbay’s *Manas*, stretching to 180,000 verse lines, was measured as four times larger than the Persian *Shahname* and some forty times longer than the *Iliad*; Sıyaqbay’s, at 500,533 verse lines, was twenty times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, and two-and-a-half times the length of the *Māhābhārata*.

To the Kyrgyz, the *Manas* has a distinct and deeply respected significance, as a repository of national heritage. At a state celebration of its supposed 1,000-year history in 1995, the Kyrgyz President, Askar Akayev, announced that all Kyrgyz citizens should follow the ‘seven principles of *Manas*’ – national unity, generous and tolerant humanism, international friendship and cooperation, harmony with nature, patriotism, hard work and education, and strengthening the state. Today, episodes from the *Manas* feature at private and public celebrations, and where once bards performed for villagers or khans, they now appear on national and international stages and on TV. The *Manas*, then, overflows with iconicity; episodes provide storylines for theatrical productions and for children’s books, and images feature on billboards and in adverts.

A considerable body of material has been published on the *Manas*, beginning with the nineteenth-century collections by Rotmistr Čokan Čingisovich Valikhanov (1835-1865) and Wilhelm Radloff (1837-1918; Vasiliı Vasilievıč Radlov). The primary focus of the majority of this material

is on poetry as text. Textual analysis is of course of immense value, and so in this volume we survey what has been done by others. But, our focus here is rather different. When a bard sings for a Kyrgyz audience he tells familiar stories, of the exploits of heroes, of great battles, of births, marriages and deaths, and so we attempt to offer stories that are both readable and familiar, supplementing these with illustrations, in a way that avoids the textual complexities that academic accounts of oral literature can introduce. This is not a criticism of the great work done by those who translate the texts faithfully into a close English poetic equivalent, amongst whom the most respected name is Arthur Hatto. Their contributions retain many of the place names, personal names, and epithets of the original, but in so doing they remove the immediacy of the familiar known to the audience for whom the bard sings. This is not a volume that seeks to provide fully detailed and close translations. In addition to print translations, Hatto's amongst them (particularly, Hatto 1990), we note that several episodes are available in translation and in different degrees of accuracy and detail on the Internet. This is a suitable point at which to indicate that web sources on the *Manas* are not all as reliable as one might hope, not least, broadly stated, because of the difference and distinction between Soviet/Kyrgyz scholarship and European/American scholarship.

In contrast to most previously published material, we also focus on one septegenarian contemporary performer, Saparbek Kasmambetov. This book celebrates his life, and his renditions of episodes from the *Manas*. For many scholars, the golden age of epic poetry has passed, and the great bards have died, not least because orality is today tempered in an increasingly literate world. Now, because Saparbek went to school, then trained and worked as an electrician and administrator, he is not Sagimbay or Sayaqbay. Unlike his predecessors, he can read *Manas* texts, and he has written his own – first, back in the late 1940s, in a green notebook requested by the Academy of Sciences that still sits in a Bishkek archive, and more recently in two celebrated volumes that explore lesser-known heroes. He is, as we hope readers will agree, a bard of the first order, retaining the oral tradition he inherited while adding detailing and other elements to his storytelling – much as we would expect from any great singer of tales.

Part 1 of this volume translates seven episodes from the *Manas*, as sung by Saparbek. The accompanying CDs contain recordings of some of these, and our translations of all the episodes are based on Saparbek's recordings. As we have already indicated, in our effort to let the stories be told we have not provided absolutely literal translations. The translation and editing of the episodes was undertaken with Saparbek's daughter, Gulnara Kasmambetova, and the accompanying illustrations are by Saparbek's granddaughter, Gouljan Arslan.



Part II of the volume comprises three chapters. First, in ‘Oral Epic Poetry and the *Manas*’, Howard considers epics and the literature available on them in English and European languages. Second, recognizing that this literature is often distinctly different in approach and at times in substance to that written by Soviet and Central Asian scholars, Keith Howard and Razia Sultanova then explore, in ‘The Kyrgyz *Manas*: Recorded, Performed and Studied’, some of the pertinent and extensive body of material published in Russian. Third, Saparbek Kasmambetov tells his life story, as related to Gulnara Kasmambetova in the same style as he uses to recite episodes of the *Manas*, but edited and interwoven with additional material by Howard.

Saparbek first visited SOAS in 2005, when he was invited by Razia Sultanova to demonstrate epic recitation to her BA degree students. He returned in February 2006 to take part in the conference ‘Music of the Turkic-Speaking World, Performance and the Master-Apprentice System of Oral Transmission’ organized by Razia Sultanova with Rachel Harris, Keith Howard, Alexander Knapp, Dorit Klebe and Janos Sipos, sponsored by the AHRC Research Centre for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance. That conference led to the setting up of the ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Study Group on Music of the Turkic-Speaking World. The audio CDs for this volume were recorded in April 2006 when, as part of a graduate training project, a group of students were invited to spend three days with Saparbek. They provided the audience for the recordings, and are present in the background to the excerpts from the many hours recorded that we have included here. We admit that this group hardly constituted the sort of knowledgeable, familiar and responsive audience that would best suit Saparbek’s epic storytelling. But then studio recording is itself an artifice that is often considered – though rarely by record producers, and rarely featuring on commercial audio recordings – inferior to recordings that feature the local setting, with its spontaneity, interruptions, and background soundscapes. A studio recording concentrates solely on the singer, musician, or poet. Here, in order to faithfully preserve the performance occasion, we have applied a very light touch in editing the recordings, retaining occasional pauses, coughs, and points at which Saparbek clears his throat.

The art of singing epic poetry presents challenges to those unfamiliar with Kyrgyz since, however skilful the bard, the core alternation of repeated melodic motifs in pacing lines of regular length with intoned initial, transitional and cadential declamations of flexible length offers limited musical variety. The restricted palette provides much of the reason why we have elected not to offer a lengthy musical analysis; a second reason would be that to do so would repeat what is already available elsewhere. Readers are invited to complement the brief discussions offered here (within both ‘Oral Epic Poetry and the *Manas*’ and ‘The Kyrgyz *Manas*: Recorded, Performed and Studied’) by referencing Prior’s extended notation and

discussion of the six wax cylinder recordings of an earlier bard that survive from the beginning of the twentieth century (Prior 2006: 16–82; 95–110).

This volume is part of a series sponsored by the AHRC Research Centre. The Research Centre was established in September 2002 as a joint venture between SOAS, the University of Surrey and Roehampton University, funded by the (British) Arts and Humanities Research Council. The Centre explored questions raised by the performance of music and movement (and by extension, other performance activities), and their interrelationships, in artistic practice beyond the European art and popular music canons. To do so, it sought to establish: a synthesis between the performance concerns of different disciplines within academic research, exploring and addressing a discrete set of activities that have performance at their core; methodologies and techniques utilized in analysis to evaluate their appropriateness and efficacy in resolving research questions that have performance at their core; acknowledgement of common music, dance, and other performance arts' concerns of cultural coding – aspects of performance determined by social and cultural contexts. The Centre's approach shifted the focus of study to take on-board and explain the perceptions of performers from Asia and Africa about their own music and dance, and about its transformations and adaptations. This is precisely what we do in this volume, not least by challenging some of the received understandings and interpretations of epic heroic poetry that have been put forward – whether informed by the Milman Parry and Albert Lord theoretical model of epic poetry or by the Soviet/Central Asian philosophical and folkloric tradition – through the performance, and the documentation of that performance, of a contemporary bard, Saparbek.

Each volume in the Research Centre's series celebrates one or more performer, presenting discussions of, *inter alia*, training, context and repertory. Each is the result of a collaborative research project, in which performers have worked alongside academics and others – in this case including family members of the bard – to record, edit and master audio materials, and to discuss their background, experience and understanding of the performance tradition for which they are renowned. Our intention is not to offer an overview of a single music, dance, or other performance culture, nor to present an exhaustive account of, say, epic poetry or the *Manas*; many other publications seek to do this, as our list of references hopefully indicates. Rather, we have endeavoured to bring these master performers to readers, listeners and viewers, allowing them a voice while at the same time unravelling salient aspects of performance.

Why? Well, the world is getting smaller. While scholars within the fields of ethnomusicology, dance anthropology and to some extent folklore have, and rightly, prided themselves on conducting fieldwork among responsive musicians and dancers in obscure and remote places, the artists all too often

remain distant to the resulting ethnographic representations. With Airbus and Boeing competing to produce ever-larger airplanes, this approach is no longer tenable. Musicians and dancers, just as do scholars, travel the world. The romantic notion of an illiterate bard sitting in a yurt on the steppes no longer has relevance in the contemporary world, and can mislead us into thinking that the vibrant, thoughtful and incisive performers of today are no more than a pale echo, or perhaps an imitation, of former glories. More so, when the analysts and critics of their performance use theoretical models of what once *might* have been. Again, distance is problematic where the performance presented uses a language far removed from the familiar. Even though it seems to be a rule within the commercial ‘world music’ genre that vocalists should sing in any language other than English, the mix of familiar and Otherness represented in the commercial genre is quite different from recitations of the *Manas*. It seems, then, that the deterritorialized world for which Arjun Appadurai famously argued (e.g., 1990), or the hyper-consumerism of much of the global economy and its cultural forms (for which, see, for example, Gómez-Pena 2001), has not – fortunately – reached and impacted on Saparbek Kasmambetov and his fellow Kyrgyz bards.

Many ethnomusicologists, dance anthropologists and folklorists would claim that their ethnographies offer faithful accounts that have been painstakingly collected, checked and cross-referenced against all available materials, publications and archives. In some cases, cross-referencing requires a return to the field, to allow reflection and, perhaps, additional discussion and deliberation. In the 1980s and 1990s, many trumpeted the benefits of ‘emic’ accounts, (e.g., taking ethnomusicological texts, Hugo Zemp (1981), Steven Feld (1982) and Marina Roseman (1991)). They talked about how to capture what musicians, dancers, and actors thought about their performance arts, and how to translate the metaphors used within the culture studied into a familiar language. Our approach here in presenting (and illustrating) translated episodes of the *Manas* represents our own take on this issue as well as our attempt to avoid fetishising Otherness. In the 1970s and 1980s, ethnographies relating performance traditions tended to follow trends in anthropology, often with a touch of delay. Still, all too often, the production of performance is discussed as if confined by its locale, with populations largely considered impervious to the global media or resisting change, maintaining and conserving their traditions. By the 1990s, calls to preserve the intangible heritage – performance arts and crafts – were becoming louder. Following Alan Lomax (1985: 40–46), and his comment that the world is an agreeable and stimulating habitat precisely because of cultural diversity, the standardization of culture by the global media, and cultural production made for us rather than by us, began to be questioned. What better way of celebrating diversity than allowing musicians, dancers, and other performance artists a voice? How, though, can scholars share

ownership of accounts with them? This volume is but one stage on the journey.

### Notes on Romanization

No single romanization system has yet been commonly accepted as standard for Kyrgyz terms. Indeed, there are frequent discrepancies in the romanizations of terms in the published literature. Here, our aim is primarily to aid readability by a broad as well as a specialist audience.

For Kyrgyz terms, we have been guided by Thomas Pedersen's summary of romanization systems (<http://transliteration.eki.ee/pdf/Kirghiz.pdf>, accessed on 31 March 2009). The ISO9 table for transliterating Cyrillic (International Organization for Standardization, 1995) has proved useful, and for the Cyrillic 'н', rendered previously as 'η' or 'ng', we adopt the ISO's 'n'. Similarly, ж for Ж, ч for Ч, and ш for Ш. As a general guide for those unfamiliar with Central Asian languages, 'n' is pronounced reasonably close to 'ng', 'ч' close to 'ch', 'ш' to 'sh', and ж to 'zh'. Long vowels are indicated by doubling the vowel symbol. We do not, however, adopt the additional ISO9 diacritics for vowels that complicate matters; we retain the common rendering of о as ö (rather than ISO9's ô) and у as ü (rather than ù).

Note an immediate mismatch: 'Kyrgyz' in the ISO system, but 'Kirghiz' in the URL address cited above. We adopt the now-common and generally accepted 'Kyrgyz' and 'Kyrgyzstan'. In fact, the Cyrillic 'ы', rendered variously in previous publications on the Manas as 'i' or 'ı', is in the ISO system rendered as 'y'. This is somewhat problematic because, first, there is a different expectation of the pronunciation of 'y' in English, as well as a potential resultant confusion between Cyrillic 'ы', and 'й', the latter formerly romanized most commonly as 'y' rather than the former. In respect to pronunciation, and to give a better sense of pronunciation, in the episodes from the *Manas* (and where characters or places from the epic are discussed in later chapters), we have tended to use 'ı' rather than 'y' for Cyrillic 'ы' in personal names, geographical names, and ethnonyms – the exception, though, being 'Kyrgyz'. In this, we have been guided by the practice of Arthur Hatto (e.g., 1990: 607–23). Our reason is because of the common Kyrgyz finals, for which ISO9 would require '-ej' and '-aj' in, for example, 'Semetej' (where the pronunciation is more readily appreciated as closer to '-ey' or '-ei'), and '-baj' for a rich person (where the pronunciation is much closer to '-bay/-bei'). Our solution is to retain '-ey' and '-ay', as in 'Semetey' and '-bay'.

Common spellings are used for familiar geographical names, notably 'kul' rather than 'köl' for 'lake'. But, to respect Saparbek's pronunciation, in

the *Manas* episodes Bukhara is rendered as ‘Bukar’, and Andijan as ‘Andiyan’. For other scripts we have adopted standard romanization systems, for example, IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration) for South Asian terms and McCune-Reischauer for Korean.