

Dedicated to the  
1000th Anniversary  
of the Kirghiz epos  
"MANAS"

# MANAS

VOLUME 1

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY  
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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This is truly the greatest challenge that has been offered to me in my half-a-century as a translator of verse, and I count it a high honour to be deemed worthy of doing battle with *Manas*, the Kirghizian champion. We struggled together many days and nights, neither defeating the other, and thus became the firmest of friends. In accordance with ancient Kirghizian custom I have presented him with a new English robe, which changes his looks, though not his nature, but which makes him recognisable to readers of English.

Many Kirghizian friends helped me with the cutting and sewing, thus 1,000th anniversary in 1995, with the appearance of this English edition of this great epic poem. These are difficult times for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and there are many material shortages, but I hope that they will get known him.

The road to understanding another folk' is never easy, and there are many pitfalls on the way. Let me, as an old traveller, knowing Kirghizia and its folk very well, give a few words of advice which will help you attain this goal.

First of all the sign-posts! Numbers at the end of lines in the text relate the commentary found at the end of this book, and asterisks \* refer to the vocabulary

also found there. They have been composed by Kirgizian and other experts, and you will find them of great help and interest.

So your road will take you back a thousand years or more, and for nine-tenths of the way will be a purely oral one, since nothing of this epic poem was written down until the 1850's! For about nine hundred years at least it remained solely on the lips of the old bards, and in the minds and hearts of the Kirghizian folk.

It was not created by one man, nor in one year, nor even in one century, but was the gradual accumulation of folk memories, of their tragedies, victories, and aspirations. Outstanding bards, pupils of their predecessors, further improved, polished, reorganized and prolonged this epic. No other heroic poem can compare with it in its magnitude, not even the Indian Mahabharata or the Greek Odyssey.

From 1920 onwards, under Soviet power, diverse fragments of the epic were published, but not until 1952, when a great conference was held in Frunze, to organize the collection and recording of all known versions of the epic, did serious work start, leading to the publication of the major part of the poem, in the late 1950's. In 1984 a beautiful 4-volume edition of the epic was published in Frunze, and in the same year a scientific line-for-line version was published in Russian, with parallel original text, by Oriental Literature Publishers, Moscow. The second and third volumes came out in 1988 and 1990 respectively, and the final volume is now in preparation. I extend to the authors of these books my deep thanks.

If the reader asks where and when does his road begin, I can only say that no one knows for certain, but it is obvious that the tap-roots go very deep into Kirghizian history, back to the time when they were small individual groups of wandering cattle-breeders, with no conception of unity as a whole people, or nation.

Three main opinions exist regarding the origin of the epic:

1. The VII - X century, when the Kirghiz lived near the Yenesei.

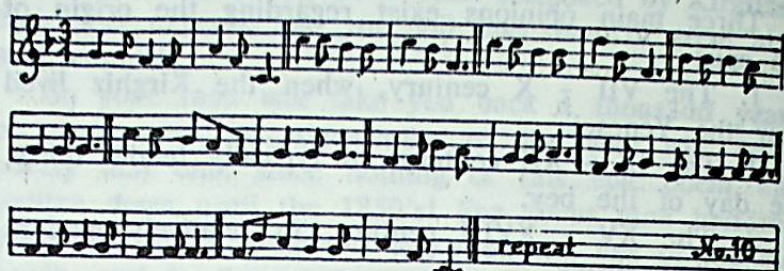
2. The IX - XII century, in typically feudal times, the day of the bey.

3. The XV - XVIII century, in relatively modern times, that means.

I certainly prefer the first, and for several good reasons. Having translated several epic poems, including the Russian "Lay of Prince Igor's Host" and the Ossetian folk-epic "Tales of the Narts", one sees many parallels. Folk-lore is universal, and strikingly similar wherever it comes from. Even the Greek tragedies fit into this picture, to say nothing of the Egyptian "Hymn to the Sun" c.3,200B.C.

This Kirghizian epic has the same flavour of antiquity. There are many indications of its early beginning. Take here just one - In Vol. 1. lines 6222-3, Kirghizian brothers, long parted, meet and greet with the Kirghizian "Mëndyu!" because the word "Salaam!" was not known then. That means this episode at least dates back before Islam religion came to the Kirghiz, in the 7-th century. There are also signs that matriarchs and Amazons had not quite died out, but are visible in Manas' wife Kanikei, and the warrior maid Saikal.

If the reader wishes to taste the real flavour of this poem, he should read it aloud, because its words make music, by themselves. The epic is usually recited by special trained bards "Manaschi" who generally sing it to the accompaniment of the three-stringed komuz. Here again, there are many various melodies, suiting the tastes of individual reciters. They get lost in the singing, almost go into a trance. They make gesticulations, and take poses, also in accord with standardised custom, and the first time I heard Manas sung so I was straightway simply captivated, and carried away by the drama.



This is one of a score of variations which I heard and liked. Look at the first six bars, counting two to a line of verse, and you will see seven notes to a line, four longer, and three shorter. accent falling on 1,3,5,7, leaving 2,4,6, unaccented. If we write this in the way accepted for poetic metre we get /-/-/-. So the verse is written in four-foot trochaic metre, truncated. But look in bars 9, and 17, and you will see triplets in the music. So in the trochaic metre we get dactyls mixed up so /-/-/-/ eight notes to a line. This is interesting, because we have here a likeness to English prosody, where we, in contradistinction to all other European languages, have the privilege of doing just this - it is termed "substitution". We can also mix anapaests with iambics. Moreover, we may do some more than once in one line, and this holds good for Kirghizians too. One other point of great importance for the reading of this epic - this means that all lines end with an accented syllable, a so-called masculine rhyme, as 80% of English lines do, in fact. Dear reader, all Kirghizian words, names especially are accented on the last syllable. Please remember this when reading, as it will simplify the matter so.

Since I have advised you to read aloud to gain full satisfaction, I should now say a word or two about pronunciation, especially of vowel sounds. Kirghizians speak an oriental turkish tongue, where the vowel sounds are as follows: A = ah, E = ay, I = ee, O = oh, U = oo. ě = e(r) as in "her". Diphthongs AI = aye, EI = ay, OI = oy. Doubled vowels are always both pronounced. Most frequently occurring are AA =

ah-ah, OO = oh-oh and UU = oo-oo. The consonantal "dzh" is very near our English J, and for Manas' father Jakib, I have spelt it so. Elsewhere it is closer to "ch". Let us look at a few heroes and heroines and get them right, since they are repeated hundreds of times, and will spoil our reading if we don't pronounce them well.

Manas = Mahnas, not Man-ass! His father Jakib = Dzhakib, accent on last syllable, not first (not Jacob) Chiyirdi-Cheeyeerdy his mother, Kanikey-Kahneekay, his wife. Almambet = Ahlmahmbeyt, his closest friend, Alo-oke, an opponent whose name I have divided so because it appears so often, is pronounced Ahlo-okay, Alike-Ah-lee-kay (not alike!) A few place-names are almost recognizable, for example Mandzhuria = Manchuria, Mangul = Mongol, but one most frequently used, Kitai, will puzzle you, if you don't know it - for it is simply China! So Kitais are Chinese folk or Chinese tribes.

Several features of the epic's composition are unusual for most readers of English, but are part and parcel of the poem and originate in the way I have tried to preserve. First - frequent repetitions. One idea expressed in the several ways. Whole episodes are repeated, speeches are repeated, lines and individual words are repeated - all for the purpose of emphasis and balance. Because of these repetitions, the epic stuck in the minds of those who heard it, and so it passed on from generation to generation through a whole millennium. Alliteration, which is merely the repetition of the first letter in a word is accompanied by assonance, which is repetition of the vowels, and by the standardization of adjectives for certain characters and objects - thus Manas is either a lion, or a tiger, or a leopard, and elders on the council are always wise, white-bearded, eloquent, far-sighted, and so on.

Just a word about rhymes, which can be found in various patterns in many places. Very common is the couplet aa,bb,cc,dd,and so on, but triplets also occur, as well as alternating rhymes abab,cdcd. Sometimes one

word is used as a rhyme for several lines, either at its end, or at its beginning, as a head-rhyme. Such are repeated dozens of times, and of course internal rhymes are found as well.

Variations in length of line, rhyme patterns, musical tonality, emotional content, accentuation of horse-riding trotting or galloping motions, onomatopoeic words for the clash and clatter of battle, all make this a most colourful and convincing story, which I hope I have now helped the reader to enjoy. Open your eyes, open your hearts, and don't be put off by the unusual, and here you will find your road to the understanding of a wonderful people and their history.

Happy journey!

Walter May