

The Bard Jusup Mamay

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Manas is an oral epic popular among the Kirghiz that recounts the deeds of the hero Manas and the seven generations of his progeny who fought against their enemies. This spectacular epic of over 230,000 lines has survived for hundreds of years through performances by epic singers. *Manas* can be found across the face of central Asia, where it is widely known throughout Kirghizia, Kazakstan, China's Xinjiang, and even parts of Afghanistan and Tadjikistan.

In China, *Manas* exists primarily in the four counties of Atushi, Aktao, Wulukqar, and Akqi in the Kezilsu Kerkez Autonomous Prefecture. More than 90 percent of 140,000 Kirghiz live in these four counties. There are also singers on the Tekes steppe and in the Tiacheng mountains around Xinjiang. In the Xinjiang region of China performances of *Manas* were once very popular. When a comprehensive survey was conducted in the early 1960s in the southern part of the Tianshan Mountains, over 80 *Manas* singers were found among the Kirghiz (Liu 1990). While doing fieldwork in September of 1998 in the three townships of Akqi county, I visited nine singers (ranging from ages 20 to 78), many of whom often performed sections of *Manas* at the invitation of the local people.

The Kirghiz call epic singers *jomokqi* ("storyteller") and the most talented singers *qong jomokqi* ("great storyteller"). The great *jomokqi* have an extraordinary memory, unbounded imagination, and an amazing capacity for improvisation: they can usually perform three or more sections of *Manas* and can recount the origin and genealogy of the heroes as well as the context of the epic. The capacity for improvisation is one of the major factors that distinguishes a *qong jomokqi* from a *keqik* ("small") *jomokqi*. After 1930, the Kirghiz began to call the *Manas* singers *manasqi*; a great *manasqi* is called *qong manasqi* or *kara manasqi*.¹

¹ *Kara* means "black" and "strong and powerful." Many *manasqi* can perform *Manas*, but few are distinguished by the honorific *qong manasqi*.

The number of *qong manasqi* has rapidly decreased—only four have been found in China in the twentieth century. The first is Jusup Ahong (1884-1922), who was born in the township of Karaq, Akqi county, and could perform five sections of the epic cycle *Manas* (from the first section called *Manas* to the fifth *Saiyt*). The second is Ebrayin Akunbe (1882-1959), who was also born in the township of Karaq, Akqi county, and could perform eight sections of *Manas* (from the first section to the eighth, *Qigtaiy*). The third is Eshimat Memet (1880-1963), born in the township of Karabulak, Wulukqar county; he claimed that he could perform seven sections of *Manas*.² The fourth is Jusup Mamay (1918-), born in the township of Karabulak, Akqi county, who could perform all eight sections of *Manas*. He is the only living singer in the world who deserves the title of *qong manasqi*. Though these four are few in number, they are important inheritors of Kirghiz culture who could not only perform *Manas* but were also thoroughly versed in Kirghiz myths, legends, ballads, sayings, and folk customs.

The Life Story of Jusup Mamay

Jusup Mamay was born in the At jay lo pasture of the village of Mirkaiq. The pasture lies on a mountain remote from the county seat, a distance of at least two to three days journey by horseback. Akqi is a small county where the Kirghiz live in compact communities situated at an altitude of over 2,000 meters in the cold and rugged southwestern part of the Tianshan Mountains. The Toshigan River cuts across the county from west to east. For a long time people here have practiced animal husbandry, supplemented by agriculture. Akqi county is a remote region without good transportation; as a result, it has had little contact with modern civilization. For that reason, Kirghiz folk culture has survived well.

Performances of *Manas* are very popular, and whenever celebrations are held people gather for its performance. Competitions between singers are even more exciting. After the October Revolution in Soviet Russia, many Kirghiz from Kirghizia came to Akqi county, among them the great master Sagenbay Olozbakof (1867-1930), a famous *Manas* singer from the former Soviet Union. Olozbakof once entered an intense match against the

² He died soon after a recording was made of his performance of the first section of *Manas* and its second section *Saimaitaiy*.

famous *manasqi* Jusup Ahong from Akqi county, which continued without pause for five to six days and was judged by an elderly person from the community. Both performers were well-known masters of *Manas* and each had his own special style. The audience, however, unanimously believed that Jusup Ahong from Akqi county had won. The long tradition of *Manas*



Jusup Mamay, *Manas* epic singer. Photograph by Guo Xiaodong.

and a social context that encourages frequent performances have cultivated and shaped one generation of *Manas* singers after another. Akqi county is important for the development of master singers of the epic and its dissemination; in the early twentieth century, the renowned master *Manas* performers Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe both hailed from Akqi county. Jusup Mamay has also lived among his adoring *Manas*-loving public from a very young age, within a rich milieu of folk culture.

Jusup Mamay's father, Mamay, was a simple and honest nomad; his mother Burul was a well-known singer, who raised twenty-seven sons and daughters (twenty-four died as infants and only three survived to adulthood). The eldest son was Balbai, followed by a daughter Rphan and the youngest son Jusup Mamay, who is clever, smart, and endowed with an extraordinary memory. His father paid much attention to the children's education. He sold his only horse to pay for the education of his two sons, Balbai and Jusup Mamay. They were both sent to a locally revered scholar for instruction in the culture.

There is a mythical story about Jusup Mamay's birth: after Burul had Balbai and Rphan, she lost a dozen sons and a dozen daughters in childbirth. This legendary story bears a resemblance to the hero's birth in the Turkic epic. According to the story, the mother was weak, exhausted, and in despair because only two of her twenty-six children had survived labor. Mamay took his wife to the towns of Turpan, Aksu, and Kashir to recover. They also traveled to a hot spring and a sacred mausoleum to pray. Amazingly, the sixty-year-old Burul became pregnant again. She dreamed that an elderly couple passed by and that the old woman gave a parcel to her saying: "you have suffered a great deal, here is a gift for you. The yak is a sacred animal and the yak god will protect you!" With this, the old couple disappeared. Burul opened the parcel and found a meatball in the shape of a yak. She awoke with the scene still fresh in her mind, believing that it must be a good omen for the fetus. In the spring of April 1918, the sixty-one-year-old Burul bore her twenty-seventh child—Jusup Mamay. He was born with dense hair covering his body that fell off after forty days. Thinking they were too old, the parents decided to give the baby to their eldest son Balbai to raise. Balbai was twenty-six years older than his newborn brother.³

It is important to note that Jusup Mamay was born into a typical folk artist family. His father was a great fan of *Manas* and his mother and sister were locally renowned folk singers. Although the entire family steered him toward becoming an epic singer, it was his brother Balbai who most influenced him, since he was given to Balbai the moment he came into the world and was then cared for by his sister-in-law. Balbai himself was a collector of Kirghiz folk literature who often accompanied caravans along the Silk Road. Whenever he traveled, he would pay a visit to storytellers and singers, making a record of the narrated stories and sagas that they performed. He never missed the chance of seeing *manasqis* and taking

³ Jumaturdi and Shayik 1997.

down their songs. Balbai's greatest accomplishment was to make records of *Manas* performed and narrated by the master epic balladists Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe in Akqi County and to have transliterated these into a complete eight-chapter manuscript of *Manas*, treating it with artistic finish.⁴

Balbai passed his recorded and compiled collection of *Manas* to his younger brother. Under the guidance of his older brother and surrogate father, Jusup began learning to perform at the age of eight. Every night, the parents would light a candle and let the young Jusup Mamay perform *Manas* for them. Balbai also asked his brother to recite sections of the epic in order to test his knowledge. Balbai taught him performance skills, instructing him to add certain gestures and facial expressions and to modulate tones according to the development and changes of plots in the epic. When the hero is in the heat of battle, the tone should rise and the facial expression should be serious. When giving advice or comfort, he should use many proverbs and aphorisms. Beautiful and loving words must be reserved for the representation of women, and the tone and voice should be modulated to express sadness and depression. Gestures and tones accompany each other in an appropriate manner, creating a perfect cosmos of emotional communication.⁵

It took eight years for Jusup Mamay to learn by heart all eight parts of *Manas*, more than 200,000 lines from his brother's record and compilation. He learned everything: from the accomplishments of the eight generations of *Manas* to over one hundred characters and dozens of events, great and small. He can recite everyone's genealogy and his forefathers' relationship to the *Manas* family. He can give detailed descriptions of what a particular figure did in his lifetime, as well as the experiences of later generations. Balbai's influence was great and Mamay remains full of respect and gratitude for his brother. When he mentions learning to perform *Manas*, he first mentions Balbai.

When asked to tell how he mastered the skill of performing the epic of *Manas*, however, Jusup Mamay insists on the role of "dream-teaching," like other famous *Manas* singers. When I visited Mamay in September 1989 and asked him to tell how he had learned to perform *Manas*, he recalled his brother's influence and then continued:

⁴ Here "artistic finish" means editing by adding and deleting according to the editor's preferences.

⁵ See further Mamay 1994.

One morning when I was thirteen, I slept and dreamt that five mounted men appeared with their backs to me. I went up to the last of them and saw he was riding without a saddle. He told me that the hero Manas was first and that he was followed by Old Man Bakay, who in turn was followed by the hero Almaibet, who was closely followed by great general Chuwak. Behind Chuwak was Ajbay, the man who speaking to me. Without finishing his speech he disappeared. I awoke from the dream feeling restless. My parents asked whether I had had a dream, and I told them everything. They instructed me to remain silent about the dream and not mention it before reaching the age of forty. Since that dream I have been able to remember the lines of *Manas* upon my first reading of them.

Jusup Mamay has told others about the dream, but it is somewhat different with each telling. For example, he said that when he was eight years old he had dreamed about the heroes Manas, Bakay, and Almbet, who told him not to perform *Manas* before he reached age forty, but that after forty he would become a great *manasqi*. He was able to perform immediately upon waking. In the 1960s he told Sakai Yumair, who was responsible for making a record of *Manas*, that when he was small, he was sleeping in the yurt with a few nomads when he dreamed of a man mounted on a white horse who asked him to perform *Manas*. Mamay answered, "I cannot sing." The rider said, "You can sing if you open your mouth." He sang and awoke singing. From then on he could perform *Manas*.

There are some common points in the different versions. First, Mamay insisted on "dream-teaching" between the 1960s and the late 1980s, even though the dream came to him at different times (at age eight and at thirteen) and in different places (beside his parents or with the nomads). He saw the epic hero in different places (beside his parents or with the nomads), and immediately afterwards he could perform *Manas*. Second, Mamay mentioned on several occasions the prohibition against performing *Manas* before forty. Sometimes he said his parents warned him not to disclose the content of the dream before forty, while sometimes the prohibition came from the hero. He offered the following explanation (Mamay 1994:238):

My father often told me not to perform epics before an audience. Because *Manas* is a sacred piece, it would evoke ill omens if performed at a young age. I followed my father's advice and never performed *Manas* in public even though I had learned everything by heart.

The idea of “dream-teaching” is popular among *Manas* singers.⁶ Traces of its sacredness and mystery survive in oral epics and offer an interesting subject worthy of further exploration.

Not yet twenty, Jusup Mamay lost two relatives, his father and his brother, in the 1930s. Their deaths came as a tremendous blow to him, and, in order to rid himself of solitude and sadness, he sang *Manas* when herding in the mountains or hunting with falcons. He sang *Manas* in dreams and woke the family, who upon seeing him sweating profusely were reluctant to wake him up. On workdays he would sing the epics to himself in a low voice. He was so obsessed with the song that he would not hear those who greeted him. The villagers thought that he had mental problems (Jumaturdi and Shayik 1997).

Jusup Mamay has had a challenging life in other respects as well. He was a nomad who herded sheep deep in the mountains, rode and trained horses for racing, trained falcons and went hunting on the Gobi desert and in the forest, and taught Kirghiz children to learn to read and write. These laborious experiences and life events have helped him to raise his performance level. He told people around him (Turdu 1994:223): “Anything you do not see with your own eyes would be difficult to narrate well. Direct experience cannot fail to influence you. My life experiences have no doubt influenced my way of performing *Manas*. For example, those stories about *Manas* planting wheat in Turpan, Saimaitay’s courser Taitol, Taitol’s falcon, Saimaitay’s white falcon, and others would appear more exciting than when I first learned to perform them. I believe the adage that hearing one hundred times is no better than witnessing just once.”

Mamay has not distanced himself from his Kirghiz roots; he lives among and associates with other Kirghiz people day and night. His technique of performing *Manas*—inherited from the oral tradition embodied by the *manasqis* he heard perform on countless occasions, *manasqis* with no less creative input than his own—makes use of his work experiences, his taste, and his perceptions about life. All these elements add color and variety to his versions of the epic.

⁶ Some *manasqi* say that they learned to perform *Manas* in a dream. The great *manasqi* Yusup Ahong, who was famous in the early twentieth century, once said that he fell asleep and dreamed of the hero Manas and ever since could perform *Manas*. The famous singers Sagenbay Olozbakof and Dinibaik from Kirghizia spoke about the dream revelations in which they met with epic heroes and upon waking could perform *Manas*. The taboo against performing *Manas* before the age of forty also exists among other *manasqis*.

Mamay's marriage was arranged at the age of nine by his parents, who, at over seventy years of age, were eager to see that he begin his own family. Though the bride, Sailihand, and bridegroom were very young, their marriage was spectacular; three years later they began to live together as husband and wife. At twenty-four, Mamay fell in love with Aytbb, a beautiful young girl who was mute, and proposed to take her as a second wife. However, her family reproached him for this proposal. With the acquiescence of the girl and the help of friends, Mamay abducted Aytbb. The two wives treated each other like sisters and got along well. After liberation (in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took power), the Marriage Law⁷ was in force, and Mamay chose to keep Aytbb, who was childless, and divorce his first wife Sailihand, who had two children by him. Mamay remains in close touch with his former wife and their two children, looking after them. He now has three children (including an adopted child), seven grandsons, six granddaughters, and one great-grandson. They all live in his hometown in Akqi County. Some are doctors, some are teachers, and some are officials; most, however, are nomads living deep in the mountains. Mamay is a kind patriarch to his large family and cares for the growth of every one of them.

Jusup Mamay came to the attention of scholars during a vast survey of *Manas* epic singing conducted in 1961. At that time he was forty-three and was working half the day and singing the other half. To ensure that he could concentrate on performing epic, it was arranged for him to stay at Atushi, capital of the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture. Yusaiyn, who took part in collecting and translating *Manas*, told others that "Jusup Mamay was in his prime at that time, full of enthusiasm; whenever asked, he would sing for three to four hours. The notekeeper's hand was too tired to carry on while he continued, ever enthusiastic and indefatigable." Liu Fajun, who was in charge of this collecting process, has observed that "Jusup Mamay sang eight to twelve hours a day; the notekeeper's hand was numb from working too long, and he could ask for a replacement, whereas the singer could not." For over six months he sang continuously, and five parts of the epic were recorded, about 90,000 lines.

In 1964, the Chinese Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art set up the *Manas* Work Group in collaboration with the Xinjiang Federation of Literacy and Art Circles and the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture. Jusup Mamay was a member of the group, and during that time he supplemented the five sections, adding 61,000 more lines. He also sang a

⁷ One of the famous new laws imposed by the People's Government of China to eradicate old marriage customs with roots in feudalism.

new sixth section of 45,000 lines, *Asilbaqa Bekbaqa*. With this supplement, Mamay's 196,000 lines of *Manas* in six parts had all been written down.

During the Cultural Revolution (1969-71) the five sections, including the notes and Chinese translations, were lost; only the second section, *Semaitaiy*, was preserved. At the end of 1979, Jusup Mamay was invited to Beijing and he performed the epic from the beginning. In comparison with the versions of 1961 and 1964, this one increases some passages and reduces others. The most noteworthy achievement is that at this time he sang the seventh section of *Manas*, *Sombiraik*, and the eighth, *Qigtaiy*.⁸

Jusup Mamay's eight-part *Manas*, originally written down in the Kirghiz language, was compiled and published in eighteen volumes (Mamay 1984-95). His extraordinary accomplishment of preserving *Manas* has been honored many times. For his eightieth birthday the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture and the Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture held a spectacular ceremony. On 10 September 1998, in Atushi, the capital of the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture, the birthday celebration for Mamay was held—it has since become an important festival for the Kirghiz people. They sang and danced to pay their heartfelt respects to this revered man who has become a folk hero, a figure of whom the Kirghiz people are justly proud. In a solemn ceremony the head of the prefecture presented Mamay with a horse and a gown.

The Epic *Manas* as Sung by Jusup Mamay

The Origin of Jusup Mamay's Eight-Part Manas

The origin of Jusup Mamay's eight-part *Manas* is an important subject for *Manas* research and there are different views on it. Mamay's own authoritative account proceeds as follows: "My brother Balbai was a student of Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe, who passed *Manas* orally to him for the purpose of making a record of it. The version of *Manas* I sang is based on my brother's collection, but it is enriched and improvisation is added" (Mamay 1994:234-39). In 1934 Balbai gave his collection and notes on *Manas* to his brother Mamay and told him: "Here is the complete story of the eight generations of *Manas* for you to keep. I hope you can learn and memorize the whole epic" (*idem*). He also told him, "From the Kirghiz at

⁸ In 1979 Jusup Mamay sang the first section, *Manas*, the third, *Saiytek*, along with the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth; he noted them down himself after returning to Urumqi.

the riverside of the Yenisey to Saimaitai and Saiytek, this part was narrated by Jusup Ahong, the famous *manasqi* from Kakxal in our country; I wrote down and modified it in some parts” (*idem*).⁹ About the last five sections, Balbai observed (*idem*):

Someone named Ebrayin Akunbe, who was a *manasqi*, said to me after attending the singing contest between Sagenbay Olozbakof and Jusup Ahong, “I do not think they are yet great *manasqis*, because they cannot sing the story about the five generations after Saitek; *Manas* should consist of eight sections and they can sing only the first three. At my request, he sang the last five sections of *Manas*, partially story-telling, partially ballad-singing. When I was sorting out the notes, I changed them into poetry.

From the above narrative, we can infer the following points: first, Jusup Mamay’s eight-part *Manas* comes directly from the notes that his brother Balbai edited; second, his brother’s first three sections, namely, *Manas*, *Semaitai*, and *Saiyiek*, stemmed from Jusup Ahong’s performance. The last five parts, *Kenenim*, *Saiyt*, *Asilbaqa-bekbaqa*, *Sombirek*, and *Qigtaiy*, however, were based on the singing script and story script of Ebrayin Akunbe.

Balbai, who has studied the origin of the eight-part *Manas* by Jusup Mamay, is a key figure: an accomplished collector and editor of *Manas* who also participated personally in re-creating *Manas*. Especially with regard to the compilation of the last five parts, his wisdom, talent, and creativity influenced the performance and representation of all the deeds of the five generations of *Manas* in poetic form; Balbai’s preservation of *Manas* is meritorious service.

Though Jusup Mamay’s performance of *Manas* originated with his brother Balbai’s edited notes, his eight-part version is somewhat different from that of his brother. Jusup Mamay is an extremely bright and versatile folk artist with an extraordinary capacity for improvisation. During the process of learning to sing *Manas*, he read not only written versions by three *manasqis* of Qaoyukai, Sapak, and Tabadel from Kirghizia, but also the manuscript of *Saimaitay* by the renowned *manasqi* Dinibek, as well as the *Manas* by Sagenbay Olozbakof. Mamay’s performances of *Manas* are enriched by his absorption of the striking contents and plots from various manuscripts. He has no prejudice against other schools and often exchanges ideas and experiences with other *manansqis*. A Kirghiz who knows him well commented, “During the years from 1961 to 1964, Jusup Mamay

⁹ Kakxal is now known as the Akqi area.

performed not for performance's sake, but as the Kirghiz folk saying goes, 'a chicken thinks of millet even in dreams'." He never forgot to share skills and experiences with other *manasqis*. He always listened to comments from the audience and other *manasqis*, and willingly accepted their judgment in order to improve and perfect his story-telling. Mamay's written version of the *Manas* epic-cycle has become a brilliant and unique variant of *Manas*, composed with great artistic skill and wisdom.

Jusup Mamay's Text as One Variation of *Manas*

Variation within limits is a distinguishing feature of oral traditions. As an oral epic, *Manas* has produced many variants during the long period of its oral inheritance. There are now about seventy known versions of *Manas*, forty in Xinjiang alone (Manbet 1997). It is commonly accepted that the most influential *Manas* variants are four in number: those of Sagenbay Olozbekof (1894-1971) and Sayakbai Kalakayef (1894-1971) from Kirghizia, and those of Jusup Mamay (1918-) and Eshimat Memet. These four manuscripts share the same basic traditional cantos: the birth of Manas, his youthful military exploits, his marriage, the sacrifice to Kokotai, the hero Almaibet's allegiance to Manas, the expedition of Manas, and, finally, Manas's death. The hero's description is largely the same in all variants, but their sections, plots, and performance styles differ slightly.

Jusup Mamay's *Manas* is particularly noteworthy. His eight-part epic is the most complete text known today. When the collection and recording of *Manas* began in the mid-nineteenth century, the first and second sections were collected and the master performer Sayakbai Kalalayef from Kirghizia was the only person who could sing the first three sections. But Mamay is unique in that he can sing all eight. His *Manas* is grand in scale and has a great driving momentum that is reflected in his representation of battle scenes rarely seen in other variants. Besides expeditions, he also provides charming descriptions of both weddings and funerals. In the sacrifice to Kokotai, for example, Mamay begins with the preparations by the seven Khans for a sacrificial ceremony in honor of the Kazak Khan Kokotai; then envoys carrying invitations are sent to the four corners of the world, and thousands upon thousands of distinguished guests from various countries and tribes arrive for the ceremony. The head of the Kalmucks, a common foe for Kirghiz and Kasak alike, makes his appearance and the Kalmucks plunder whatever they find. Under these conditions the ceremony cannot proceed. With his forty warriors, Manas punishes the Kalmucks and presides in person over ceremonial activities honoring the dead. Horse

rites, competitions testing military skills, wrestling, archery, and other activities create a scene of grandeur and highlight the tension between enemies. Almost all the epic protagonists attend the ceremony. The revered Khan Koshoy, together with thousands of people, holds a solemn prayer for the fecundity of Kanikai, Manas's wife, who has not given birth since marriage. This scene relieves the narrative tension a bit. Mamay uses magnificent and complicated descriptions for a scene involving thousands of people.

The structure of Jusup Mamay's version is also unique. All eight sections are named after heroes from Manas' family: Manas, Saimaitaiy, Saiytek, Kenenim, Saiyt, Ashbaqa and Bekbaqa, Sombirek, and Qigtaiy. Every pair of heroes is a father and son. Moreover, the sections are connected by figures and events. For example, because the old man Bakay lives to be 380 years old, he serves as a wise counselor for four generations of heroes from the Manas family and appears in four sections of the epic. Manas' wife, Kanikai, plays an important part in three sections. Each epic section is complete in content and narrative structure and may be performed independently. Among the eight sections of the epic, the first (*Manas*) and the second (*Saimaitaiy*) both took shape long ago; because they are well-known, they are more popular than the others. This genealogically developed structure is rarely seen in other epics.¹⁰

Jusup Mamay's version of *Manas* (*Saimaitaiy*) preserves many archaic components. The concept of the worship of earth and water (*yersu*¹¹), high mountains and woods, springs, milk, beasts and birds, and all natural beings permeates *Manas*. For example, heroes take oaths such as the following:

saga kilsam jammandik / oylonsom saga aramdik / tuxu tuktuu jer ursun! /
 obosu aqik kok ursun! / ziya, qalkar ko! ursun! / jayilhan jer de qop ursun!
 / asman dahi ay ursun! / jerdin betin jaxartkan jamhir menen kar ursun! /
 jata ordun saktahan / ala tao koxop dahi ursun! / uqsa appak kalkildap /
 kokto uqkan kuu ursun!

If I have evil intentions for you, I will be punished. Let the grass-laden earth punish me! Let the firmament above punish me! Let great rivers and lakes punish me! Let the uninhabited wasteland punish me! Let the

¹⁰ The Armenian epic *David from Shashun* is also structured genealogically and describes the deeds of the four generations of heroes from the Shashun's family.

¹¹ This term specifies a specific type of "ground" or "surface" water (versus water that wells up from the earth or falls from the sky).

wild grass on the ground punish me! Let the moon in the sky punish me!
 Let the rain and snow punish me! Let the Alatao Mountain punish me!
 Let the hovering white swans punish me!¹²

Elements of nature, the firmament, the earth, high mountains, rivers and lakes, and snow are mentioned in these oaths; they are not only powerful but also divine in the eyes of the Kirghiz ancestors. These oaths reflect nature worship, with homeopathic magic playing an important role in *Manas*. Whenever Manas and his warriors kill a strong enemy, for example, they decapitate him, cut open his stomach, and drink his blood in the belief that ingesting the enemy's blood will transfer his power to them. People call Manas *kaiho* ("a blood addict") because he frequently performs this ritual. Manas also has other fixed epithets: *kok jao* (blue-maned wolf), *arslai* (lion), and *ayko* (moon-lake).¹³

In contrast to the Tibetan epic *Gesar* and the Mongolian *Geser*, Jusup Mamay's *Manas* is sung entirely in verse, without spoken parts. His manuscript consists of 230,000 lines or more; most are heptasyllabic or octosyllabic verses with alliteration, mid-rhyme, and end-rhyme. Many stanzas are alliterated and also end-rhymed. Although alliteration is an archaic rhyme scheme that has disappeared from the poetry of many ethnic groups, it remains vital and operative in Mamay's *Manas*. The poetic preface of *Manas* performance, where alliterated lines represent 74 percent of the total, offers the following examples:

jarimi togun jarimi qin (A),
 jaraidardin konu yuqun (A),
 janinda turhan kix jok (B),
 jalhani menen jxi jok (B),

Half-fiction and half-truth,
 No one has ever experienced it.
 For the sake of satisfying people's wishes,
 It does not matter if we invent a little bit.¹⁴

¹² Cf. Mamay 1984-95:vol. 2, sect. 2, 465-66 and vol. 1, sect. 1. 1.

¹³ The blue-maned wolf and the lion are traditional symbols for a fierce, courageous, and powerful person. The moon in Moslem culture is an image for beauty and calmness.

¹⁴ See note 12.

In the main body of the epic, a large percentage of lines alliterate, mainly in a combination of head-rhyme and mid-rhyme. A paragraph from a four-line poem that describes Manas' father Jakip illustrates this construction:

kara neet jakip bay (A).
kayrrilip atin jeldirdi (A).
karbalastap ayilha (B).
karanghida klgani (A).

The evil-hearted Jakip Bay,
 on a trotting horse,
 towards a herding village,
 comes home in the dark.¹⁵

Jusup Mamay is highly accomplished in language arts. His rich and expressive vocabulary integrates graphic and imaginative epic language with rhythmic and elegant music, producing strong artistic effects and provoking profound emotional responses in the audience. His performance entralls audiences with its rich and archaic content, conserving the most ancient original rhyming forms of the Turkic people.

Mamay began his apprenticeship in epic performance by learning *Manas* from his brother's notes. However, he never memorized it mechanically, but kept in mind the epic's basic narrative patterns, its main contents, its plots, its context, and the mutual relations between characters in each chapter. With his brother's arrest in 1937 by Sheng Shicai (1895-1970), governor from 1933-42 in Xinjiang, the notes of *Manas* were lost. For over sixty years, Jusup Mamay has thus performed *Manas* from memory and by improvisation. Though the main contents and plots of the traditional chapters remain the same each time, a careful study of his versions of 1961, 1964, and 1979 shows that there are small differences in their degree of elaboration. For example, the 1964 and 1979 versions of the sixth section, *Asilbaqa Bekbaqa*, differ in respect to their plots and characters.¹⁶ This

¹⁵ Mamay 1984-95:vol. 1, sect. 1, 66.

¹⁶ The sixth section as performed in 1964 totaled 45,000 lines, with the main plot as follows. While Bekbaqa is out hunting, a Kalmuck Madle, a Turkment Kaldek, and the giant Ayinjar ransack the Kirghiz base camp Talas. Bekbaqa tracks them and exterminates them. His wife poisons old Bekbaqa to death. Since he has no children, the Manas family line ends. In the 1979 version, the sixth section has 37,000 lines, with the main plot unfolding somewhat differently: Mang'et and Haohan, combining forces, invade Talas. Bekbaqa is joined by Shache and Hotan in fighting the aggressors. He

variation can be ascribed to many factors: in his prime he performed very passionately, with all his talents; in old age he composed in a more mature way. Factors such as health, emotions, and the nature of the audience and their reactions also affected his performance. He began with the elegant myth of “Kerek Kez” (“Forty Maidens”) in the 1961 and 1964 performances; however, in the 1979 version he replaced this myth with another tale of origin.¹⁷ This example reinforces the observation that features of variation in the oral epic should not be neglected. Performances by singers trained by different masters of the same period, and even by the same performer on different occasions, will always differ in content and style. In this respect, we can say that there are as many variants of *Manas* as there are *Manas* singers, or even *Manas* performances.

Jusup Mamay, Tradition-bearer of Kirghiz Culture

Jusup Mamay is different from other epic singers in that he is a knowledgeable, educated *manasqi* with rich life experiences and high artistic qualifications. He is versatile, and his extraordinary memory and improvisation are unprecedented. He knows well the social history, astrology, geography, folk customs, and religious beliefs of the Kirghiz. He is familiar with every genre of Kirghiz folklore—mythology, legends, epics, narrative poems, folktales, and folk sayings, which he uses freely in his performances. More remarkable yet is that in addition to *Manas* he produced another eleven epics of history in narrative style. Among them are *Ertoshitu* (8,000 lines), *Kurmaibeck* (8,000 lines), *Baeshi* (8,900 lines), *Toltoy* (1,470 lines), *Saykal* (9,400 lines), *Mamak-shaopok* (925 lines), *Kobai* (9,400 lines), and *Jetkahan* (14,700 lines). There are three more yet to be released: *Ajbay* (5,800 lines), *Jangermurza* (7,000 lines), and *Tutano* (3,000 lines). Especially worth mentioning is the Kazak epic, the *Jetkahan*,

marries Akemangdake, who gives birth to Somubilaike, the hero in the seventh section of *Manas*.

¹⁷ I conducted an investigation of this change in 1989. The fact is that some Kirghiz intellectuals interpreted the content of the “Forty Maidens” myth in an overly modern way, believing that it suggests that the ancestors of the Kirghiz knew only the identity of their mothers but nothing about their fathers. This interpretation offered an excuse for other groups to belittle the Kirghiz. They communicated their opinions to Jusup Mamay, and the myth of “Forty Maidens” disappeared from his performances from that point forward.

which caused a stir when it was published by the Xinjiang People's Publishing House in 1993. The Kazaks gave their heartfelt thanks to Jusup Mamay for preserving this epic at a time when it was on the brink of extinction, presenting him with a horse and a gown as the highest gifts to show their respect and worship for this master singer.

Mamay began to learn *Manas* at the age of eight, and became a master *manasqi* known at home and abroad who has worked hard for the promotion of *Manas* and Kirghiz folk culture. He is a keeper and transmitter of Kirghiz folk culture and regarded as its protector. The leading authority on folklore in China, Professor Zhong Jingwen, has praised him as a "modern Homer" and a "national treasure." Many international experts on epic have visited Mamay. They have been deeply impressed by him; they never thought that such a singer capable of singing the whole *Manas* epic would be found in China, and they regard him as a wonder. On the three occasions he visited Kirghizia, he was received as a state guest and accompanied by the foreign minister. In August 1995, at the opening ceremony of an international conference on *Manas* held in Pishpek, the capital of Kirghizia, Jusup Mamay was seated next to the president of Kirghizia, who gave him a gold medal in honor of his everlasting contribution to the promotion of Kirghiz culture.

In the hearts of two million Kirghiz, Jusup Mamay is a great master *manasqi* and a cultural hero and sage. Mothers hold their babies tight and compete to have their babies' foreheads touched by his hand as a blessing. They believe that children blessed by him will be sure to possess wisdom and fortune in the future. It is said that people in his hometown try to obtain the clothes that he brings with him from Urumqi in the belief that wearing them will transmit his wisdom and extraordinary magic power. Stories about him are widespread among the people. One elderly Kirghiz woman, for example, told a young man from Urumqi that "Jusup Mamay is not an earthly man; I met him and could see behind him that there are burning candles on both of his shoulders, the symbols of a sage. You must obey his teachings. When you meet him, you should pass sideways and never directly approach him."¹⁸

Many believe that Mamay has the power of prophecy and healing, and this belief is attested by vivid description. Junus Nural and his wife from Akqi County commented on his legend as follows: "Why can he remember *Manas* so well? Because characters in the epic show up like TV pictures in

¹⁸ Adili provided me with this comment in Akqi County on September 12, 1998. He said that he had been a guest in the home of Nurdun Jnus, deputy director of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress in Wushi County, and that his mother-in-law (seventy years of age) told him that Jusup Mamay is a sage.

his mind's eye.” It is said that he saw his countryman Kadili in such pictures, and prophesied that he would become a *manasqi*; as things turned out, Kadili sang the whole day and the whole night. They also said that Jusup Mamay can cure people by putting a chopstick into water, and that the illness is dispelled when the chopstick stands upright. Junus Nural claimed that Jusup Mamay can dream or predict what will happen beforehand. For example, when he was in the worst situation of his life in the 1970s, Mamay dreamed of traveling on a plane around the world. He told Junus Nural it was an omen that he would become known throughout the world. Another person said that women who could not conceive would ask the epic singer to pray for them. He would then chant formulas and help them to conceive through the agency of his magic power.

The legendary Jusup Mamay is like a powerful shaman. A legend about the magic power of the nineteenth-century *manasqi* Keldibekm is still popular today among the folk. However, living performers like Jusup Mamay, who should be the subject of so many legends among the folk, are rare indeed. As a member of the work group on *Manas*, I participated in the translation of the epic in Atush in 1965, where I worked with Jusup Mamay for nearly a year. For over thirty years after that, I have been in close contact with him. He is both extraordinary and common: he is common in that he is kind and loving, but extraordinary in that he sings without pause when he performs *Manas*, his eyes shining, with extraordinary memory.

Epics are different from other oral traditional genres—myths and legends, folktales, ballads, and so forth. In the scholar's eyes epics are a literary work, while ordinary people consider them to be a national bible, a spiritual touchstone possessing divinity. The popularity of *Manas* among the folk tells us that the epic, full of artistic charm, holds an extraordinary position in the hearts of the Kirghiz and that a master *manasqi*, Jusup Mamay, is their sage.

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