

# The Magic of Dream in Kyrgyz Storytelling

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To become, for example, a musician, we usually attend classes for years, pass an exam, go to a conservatory, pass an exam, and graduate with diploma. But if you are Kyrgyz, you may not have to go this long, long route. You dream! At least, this is how it works when it comes to one of the most esteemed professions in human history—storytelling.

## ***Manas: The Great Kyrgyz Epic***

It is not possible to talk about storytelling in a Kyrgyz context without knowing what the *Manas* epic is. *Manas* is the most important of some 40 epics in Kyrgyz oral literature. There are 60 recorded variations and consists of a staggering 500,000 lines. In comparison, the *Mahabharata* contains around 200,000 lines, and the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* taken together are about 20,000 lines. The *Manas* epic describes the deeds of a great hero named Manas who won back the Kyrgyz territories from enemies and united 40 Kyrgyz tribes. As well-known Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov wrote: “If other peoples/nations displayed their past culture and history in written literature, sculpture, architecture, theatre, and art, the Kyrgyz people expressed their worldview, pride and dignity, battles, and their hope for the future in epic genre.”

Manas is not a historical personality, but rather a legendary and ideal hero. He is a mythological figure described as a “lion, a “tiger,” and “bloodthirsty,” but Manas is primarily known as “generous.”<sup>11</sup> Manas’s birth is likened to the birth of Chingiz Khan. Similar to the description of Chingiz Khan’s birth in *The Secret History of Mongols*, Manas was born with a “clot of blood in his hand.” Also similar to Chingiz Khan, Manas’s birth was predicted in a prophetic dream where both the sun and moon

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<sup>11</sup> *aiköl* = “generous.”

are present in the sky simultaneously:

He is created from the beams between the Sky and the Earth,

He is created from the waves of a river under the Moon,

He is created from the blend of gold and silver.<sup>2)</sup>

The *Manas* epic is valued for its sheer size and rich content, as well as its exceptional poetic language. The German scholar Wilhelm Radloff, who was one of the first to publish excerpts from the epic in the nineteenth century, wrote: “It is clear that the [Kyrgyz] people, who very much enjoy an eloquent language, consider a rhythmic speech as the highest art in the world. And therefore, the traditional poetry was developed to the highest level among the Kyrgyz.”

### **Epic Dreams**

In *Manas* epics, dreams seem to play an important role in most activities, be it predicting birth of a child, going to war, waiting for guests, or making friends. In the context of epics, there is another aspect to the dream, which is the subject of this presentaion. The greatest of epic-tellers are called *manaschis*, “those who tell the story of Manas.” They might have had an *ustat* or teacher, but usually they claim that the gift of storytelling was received through prophetic dreams.

One of the greatest manaschis of our times was Saiakbai Karalaev (1894–1971). The main version of the Manas epic was written down from his recitations. For his eloquence in epic telling he was famed as “The Homer of 20th Century.” Through his emphatic storytelling accompanied by lively gesticulation, he could make people cry and laugh, entertaining the audience for hours at a time. Here is how his prophetic dream is described:

On his way from Semiz-Bel<sup>3)</sup> to Orto-Tokoy,<sup>4)</sup> he saw a white yurt in place of an old big black rock. He became very scared from the loud noise

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<sup>2)</sup> Translation by Elmira Kojomkul kyzy.

<sup>3)</sup> Geographical name.

<sup>4)</sup> Geographical name.

that came from the sky and fainted. He then woke up and entered the yurt where Kanikei, the wife of Manas, offered him food. When he came out of the yurt, he met a white bearded man who told that he was happy that they encountered him on their way to Beijing:

Causing a great calamity in the world,  
With about forty or fifty *tümön*<sup>51</sup> of army  
We are going on a war campaign  
To the far away and hazy Beijing.

The older man then told him: “I am that Bakai who finds the way in the dark and words of wisdom when necessary. I want to give you the *gülazik*<sup>61</sup> of Manas, open your mouth.”<sup>71</sup>

In other sources, Manas’s advisor Bakai spits into the future manaschi’s mouth (in the Kyrgyz context, “golden saliva” is attributed to gifted speakers). The giving of food from people associated with Manas to Young Saiakbai is considered as a blessing and gift for Manas telling.

Despite its ancient roots, *manaschilik*<sup>81</sup> is a living tradition. One young manaschy is Rysbek Jumabaev (born in 1964). He considers Saiakbai Karalaev his teacher, although he saw him only once when he was four years old. Yet, in dreams Saiakbai seems to accompany him along the way.

Rysbek is from a remote and impoverished village in eastern Kyrgyzstan. He studied at a Moscow theater school named after Schukin, but left it after two years for unknown reasons. He struggled for years, doing odd jobs to feed his family of four children.

This is how he describes his experience in epic telling: “It all began when I was eleven and had a dream in which the famous manaschi Saiakbai recited *Manas*. . . . I started performing at small gatherings when I was sixteen. In 1983, I started having stomach aches. [By that

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<sup>51</sup> One *tümön* consists of 10,000 soldiers.

<sup>61</sup> Nomadic food of ground wheat and fat.

<sup>71</sup> See “The Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*,” Elmira Kojomkul kyzy, Washington University, 2005.

<sup>81</sup> The art of *Manas* telling.

time] I had stopped reciting the *Manas* because there weren't any invitations. [A clairvoyant] told me that I had become ill because I had stopped reciting." According to the clairvoyant's advice, Rysbek had a lamb slaughtered at a *mazar*.<sup>9)</sup> After eating lamb he had a good sleep and was awakened by a tremendous whooshing noise coming from the mountains. His companions said it was the sound of a spirit. Since then, he dreamed of Saiakbai reciting the *Manas*; in the dream, "Manas's forty knights came" to him. Then there was another dream: "It was in 1995 that I had another strong dream, in which Saiakbai and Sagymbai (1867–1930) led me to two [other] great manaschis: Shaabai Azizov (born in 1927) and Choiuke Omur-uulu (1863–1925). They grabbed me and put me on the street, as if to open the road for me. I had been working as a construction worker, a tractor driver, a herder. I left these professions and became a manaschi."

Rysbek has since performed with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble and enchanted visitors at Carnegie Hall and London Coliseum, just to name a few places.

Dream as a phenomenon in the context of story-telling is not limited to the Kyrgyz nation. Slava Kuchenov is an epic teller from Khakasia, Russia. Khakas are part of Turkic-Mongol world, to which the Kyrgyz also belong. They constitute a small minority in their own republic, where about 70,000 Khakas struggle to keep their language alive.

In 1994 Slava graduated in Saint-Petersburg at the famous Repin academy to become a sculptor. At that time he tried to learn to play guitar for six months, but he was told that he has no talent for music. When he returned to Khakasia he once went to his village. It was raining and at home Slava left his shoes to dry near the fire. At night a shadow resembling his deceased uncle came and took him to a mazar. The uncle asked him to tell *khai*, an epic, and play *chatkhan*, a plucked zither. When Slava objected that he did not know how to play music, the shadow

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<sup>9)</sup> A place of worship, usually near a tree or a spring.

warned him that if he does not follow his orders, he might fall ill or even die. “He showed me how khai should sound, how the chatkhan should be played. He said, ‘You will learn all of this.’ It was a long dream that went all night, and then I went back to the house and went to sleep. In the morning, I woke up and wondered, ‘What was that strange dream?’ I got up and went to take my shoes to go out to the toilet. The shoes were all dirty and wet.” Later, he started receiving an epic part by part. The epic, called *Ai Charykh on a Grey Horse*, seems have no equivalent in recorded Khakasian oral literature. He eventually received another epic, *Siber Chyltys on a Sixty-Foot-Long Brown Horse*. Slava Kuchenov has a Khakasian music group and travels extensively. However, he refuses to perform his epics on the stage. He insists that he may only recite the khais in an appropriately spiritual environment, otherwise he may fall sick.<sup>101</sup>

#### **End note**

Many scholars struggled to explain the phenomena of dreams. Sigmund Freud wrote many volumes on them. Yet no one seems to have been able to explain them in all aspects. Dreams often frighten us and deplete us of energy, and sometimes they empower us and help our creativity. Dreams may also serve, as we have seen in above examples, as a license for storytelling. If such a wonder still exists, then it is perhaps not so important to explain the phenomenon of dream logically and scientifically.

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<sup>101</sup> Rysbek's and Slava's dream experiences are detailed in Theodore Levin with Valentine Süzükei, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

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