



# Improvising the Voice of the Ancestors

Heritage and Identity in Central Asia

Mustafa Coşkun



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## Heritage and Identity in Central Asia

Cultural heritage and national identity have been significant themes in debates concerning Central Asia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, not only in academic circles, but more importantly among the general public in the newly independent Central Asian states. Inspired by insights from a popular traditional cultural performance in Kyrgyzstan, this book goes beyond cultural revival discourse to explore these themes from a historically informed anthropological perspective. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork and archival research in Kyrgyzstan, this historical ethnography analyses the ways in which political elite in Central Asia attempts to exercise power over its citizens through cultural production from the early twentieth century to the present. Kyrgyz oral poetry claims the centre stage in such efforts, as Kyrgyz oral poets have been highly popular not only within their communities, but also with the ruling elites over time.

Focusing on Kyrgyz *tökmö akynchlyk*, an improvisational oral poetry performance comparable to freestyle rap in a highly traditional Central Asian style, Mustafa Coşkun tells the story of a cultural tradition that has long been heavily embedded in the social and political lives of their communities. Performing roles as court poets, envoys and orators in pre-revolutionary Central Asia, oral poets enjoyed a degree of traditional authority in their communities. In the Soviet era their art was acknowledged as much-needed communication channels in a society with high levels of illiteracy, and their traditional authority was promoted by turning oral poets into prestigious cultural workers “improvising” for socialism. Today’s staunchly patriotic Kyrgyz oral poets, who perform to enthusiastic audiences at tightly packed concerts halls in venues ranging from cities to open fields in rural Kyrgyzstan, invoke the crucial roles their predecessors played in the pre-revolutionary era, while envying the prestige that Soviet-era oral poets enjoyed. Financially insecure, they earn their living today by routinely performing at life-cycle events and singing at oral poetry competitions.

Mustafa Coşkun’s book frames cultural performances as integral elements of the social and political lives of their communities. In a region unsettled by major social and political transformations, Kyrgyz oral poets performed intermediary roles as their performances translated the language of the ruling elite into the vernacular. Today, they criticise the political elite for failures, caution the nation against corruption, laziness and ignorance, and denounce regional and tribal identities promoting ethnic solidarity and interethnic peace. In an era when competing political trajectories of “transition” and “retraditionalization” figure prominently in understanding the region, this book concludes that such performances improvise alternatives that are more relevant to the ethnographic realities of the Kyrgyz, offering insights for a more ethnographically grounded vision of modernity.





## **Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia**

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### **General Editors:**

Christoph Brumann, Kirsten W. Endres, Chris Hann, Burkhard Schnepel,  
Lale Yalçın-Heckmann

### **Volume 39**

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LIT

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LIT

<https://doi.org/10.52038/978-3643-9088-6>

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**Cover Photos:**

Alatoo Square (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2013); Master Kyrgyz oral poet Elmirbek Imanaliyev (1978–2020) during celebrations of his 20th year on stage (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2013). (Photos: Mustafa Coşkun).

This book is a revised version of a dissertation manuscript, submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy I at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in 2015.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-643-90889-6 (pb)

ISBN 978-3-643-95889-1 (PDF)

**A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.**

©LIT VERLAG Dr. W. Hopf  
Berlin 2020  
Fresnostr. 2  
D-48159 Münster  
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-62 03 20  
Fax +49 (0) 2 51-23 19 72  
E-Mail: [lit@lit-verlag.de](mailto:lit@lit-verlag.de)  
<https://www.lit-verlag.de>

LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien,  
Zweigniederlassung Zürich 2020  
Flössergasse 10  
CH-8001 Zürich  
Tel. +41 (0) 76-632 84 35  
Fax  
E-Mail: [zuerich@lit-verlag.ch](mailto:zuerich@lit-verlag.ch)  
<https://www.lit-verlag.ch>

**Distribution:**

In the UK: Global Book Marketing, e-mail: [mo@centralbooks.com](mailto:mo@centralbooks.com)

In North America: Independent Publishers Group, e-mail: [orders@ipgbook.com](mailto:orders@ipgbook.com)

In Germany: LIT Verlag Fresnostr. 2, D-48159 Münster

Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 32 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99, e-mail: [vertrieb@lit-verlag.de](mailto:vertrieb@lit-verlag.de)

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## Acknowledgements

I have accumulated a great many debts since I commenced my graduate studies, and it is hardly possible to do justice to all the people and institutions who have contributed to this project in a variety of ways along the route. The intellectual journey behind this project originally began at the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University Bloomington. I was fortunate to have guidance in the study of Central Asia from Professor Nazif Shahrani, my first advisor, whose enduring support in the early years of my graduate studies will always be remembered. I also thank Eduardo Brondizio, Catherine Tucker, Sarah Phillips and Sara Friedman for their help during this period.

Next, I was fortunate enough to have been admitted to the PhD program at the International Max Planck Research School for the Anthropology, Archaeology and History of Eurasia (IMPRS ANARCHIE). I am grateful to the Department of Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, for funding this project between 2012 and 2016 and granting me generous financial support for my fieldwork and archival research, which I conducted between August 2013 and October 2014. Of the members of the dissertation committee, I thank Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Michael Müller for their enthusiastic encouragement of my work and for their time and effort in reading through earlier versions of this manuscript and offering helpful feedback. My greatest intellectual debt is to my advisor, Professor Chris Hann. I am deeply indebted to him for his guidance and unwavering support right from the inception of this project. He meticulously read all the draft chapters, provided copious feedback and helped me transform this project into a more scholarly piece of work.

The principal faculty members of the ANARCHIE Research School enriched this intellectual journey with their exciting seminars; I especially thank Adreas Pečar, Christoph Brumann, François Bertemes, Kirsten Endres and Dittmar Schorkowitz. I am grateful to Daria Sambuk, the coordinator of ANARCHIE, for being the most resourceful coordinator ever. Within the department, Berit Eckert, Anke Meyer and Anja Schwab kindly offered their help whenever I approached them with questions. Librarians Anja Neuer and Anett Kirchhof made sure I was never short of reading materials. Bettina Mann, Anja Sing, Kathrin Niehuus and Nadine Wagenbrett were unfailingly helpful with all sorts of administrative issues.

Parts of this manuscript were presented to departmental seminars at the Department of Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia, where many colleagues shared their thoughts on this topic with me: Andrew Sanchez, Dina Makram-Ebeid, Dimitra Kofti, Eeva Kesküla, Tommaso Trevisani,

Jennifer Cash and Roberta Zavoretti. Aksana Ismailbekova, Aida Alymbaeva, Judith Beyer, Nathan Light, Eva-Maria Dubuisson, Peter Finke, Meltem Sancak, Daniel Prior, Bruce Grant and Douglas Rogers generously offered their comments along the way. Several people have read this manuscript in part or in whole: I was fortunate to receive expert feedback and helpful criticisms from Ildiko Beller-Hann from an early stage. James Carrier spared several hours for me to read and discuss a chapter with him. Scott Willis selflessly went through the manuscript and helped me iron it out, but his support and enthusiasm for this project predates my graduate studies; I thank him for being a major source of encouragement all along. Of the colleagues from ANARCHIE's first cohort, Elisa Kohl-Garrity, Leah Cheung, Miriam Franchina and Jakub Štofanič were always ready to help when I needed it. A great deal of brainstorming from our endless conversations during cigarette breaks with Sascha Roth have found their way into this manuscript. I am grateful to all these individuals.

In Kyrgyzstan, I owe special thanks to the younger generation of oral poets for their friendship and patience with my endless questions. They kindly allowed me to accompany them wherever they performed and recorded their performances. They have become the celebrities of traditional Kyrgyz culture, and I enjoyed the luxury of being among their close friends. Zamirbek Üsönbayev, Rakhmatulla Kozukeev, Abdubali Akimbekov, Amantai Kutmanaliev, Shekerbek Adylov, the late Elmirbek Imanaliev, Jenishbek Jumakadyr, Aaly Tutkuchev, Azamat Bolgonbaev, Idris Ayitbayev, Bayan Akmatov, Asylbek Maratov, Turat Jumaev, Chyngyzhan Kojoshov, Bolot Nazarov, Kubat Tukeshov, Jyldyzbek Törökanov, Mirlan Altmysh Uulu: thank you so much for being part of this project. I learned a great deal from our conversations with the student-poets attending the training seminars at the *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu*. Sadyk Sher Niyaz helped me introduce myself to the community of oral poets at the *Fondu*; Shayirbek Abdyrakhman and Mirlan Samiykojo were great friends in taking me on trips to oral poetry competitions across the country. I owe separate thanks to renowned oral poets Jenishbek Jumakadyr and Aaly Tutkuchev. Every time I talked to Aaly I learned something new. He helped me get in touch with so many people whom I would otherwise not have been able to reach. He was also a great reference during my stay in his native village, Aral, where he was highly respected. Jenishbek Jumakadyr was more than a friend, and my gratitude to him goes beyond words. We had endless conversations during our trips across Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. His accounts of the history of Kyrgyz oral poetry, his biography and his rich personal archive helped me immensely during my fieldwork and while writing up this manuscript. To all

my poet friends: *Бул касиеттүү салтты аркалаган төкмө акындар жамааты, талантыңызга таазим! Өнөрүңүз өркүндөсүн!*

In Aral village, Manas region, in Talas, Büübai eje and Temirkan warmly welcomed me into their beautiful home with great hospitality. I enjoyed our lengthy conversations in the village with oral poets Shaylobek Kydyraliev and Abdylida Nuraliev. The head of the village administration, teachers at the village school and employees of the village museum were all of great help. I am deeply indebted to them all, as well as to the residents of the village who allowed me to become part of village life.

My former student Burulai Azimbek Kyzy was most helpful as my field assistant. I am grateful for her assistance with archival research, transcription of the audio and visual fieldwork data, and translation from Russian into English. This project has taken me through archives, libraries and museums, among other institutions. From the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, I discussed the central themes of this project with Omar Sooronov, Amantur Japarov, Kurmanbek Toktonaliev and the late Batma Kebekova. I thank the administrations and archivists of the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Central State Archive for Political Documentation of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Central State Archive of Kino-Photo-Phono Documents of the Kyrgyz Republic, the librarians at the National Library of the Kyrgyz Republic and officials of the Ministry of Culture for their help. Saparbek Makishov has been a wonderful friend all along; my conversations with Christopher Schwartz were quite insightful, and I had Süreyya Yiğit's unfailing support for this project from the very beginning. William Daniels kindly allowed me to use his iconic photo of Eid prayer as Lenin's statue towered over the crowd.

My late mother would have been so proud to see the fruits of her loving investment. My father, stepmother and sisters have waited so long since I left for Kyrgyzstan for the first time. They were all convinced that my absence would last only one year, and it has been almost two decades since then. I thank them all for their continued support for my adventures in the academia. I wish to record my special thanks to my parents-in-law, Idirisbek Murataliev and Gulia Muratalieva, whose help made my fieldwork experience a lot easier than it would otherwise be: thank you for babysitting our kids and offering delicious food.

Last, and most importantly, I express my deepest gratitude to my family. I am indebted to my dear wife Aika for her everlasting support, for keeping me going and for her patience with my demanding schedule and our nomadic lifestyle. As for our three little heroes, Caner, Erdem and Emre, this project could have never been completed in such a timely fashion without their loving presence.

The ethnographic material presented in Chapter 5 of this book was published previously as part of an edited volume: “Beyond safeguarding measures, or a tale of strange bedfellows: Improvisation as heritage”. In L. Smith, and N. Akagawa (eds.). 2018. *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: Practices and Politics*, pp. 218-231. London: Routledge.

## Note on Transliteration and Translation

The transliteration of non-Slavic languages written in the Cyrillic script into English, especially when following the guidelines offered in the romanization tables of the Library of Congress, does not fully correspond with the diversity of the sounds in these languages, and the modern Kyrgyz language is no exception. According to Abazov (2004), the problem results from the process of “double transliteration”, first from Kyrgyz into Russian, and then from Russian into English. I have tried to avoid double transliteration in this work, using instead a combination of the romanization rules of different sources. Below are some examples:

<i>Sample words</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>
<b>Ж</b> аш	<b>J</b> ash (not <b>Z</b> hash)
<b>Ч</b> атак	<b>Ch</b> atak
<b>Ш</b> амал	<b>Sh</b> amal
Же <b>ң</b> иш	Jenish (not <b>Zheng</b> ish or <b>Jeng</b> ish)
<b>Ы</b> р	<b>Y</b> r
<b>Ө</b> нөр	<b>Ö</b> nör
Үлгү	Ülgü
Мадания <b>т</b>	Madani <b>y</b> at
Байлык	Bailyk
Кий <b>и</b> з	Kiy <b>i</b> z
Коё <b>н</b>	Koy <b>o</b> n
Мою <b>н</b>	Moy <b>u</b> n

All translations from the Kyrgyz language into English are mine. My field assistant and colleagues offered help with the translations of Russian language materials into English.

## Abbreviations

AANKR	<i>Arkhiv Akademii Nauk Kirgizskoi Respubliki</i> (Archive of the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic)
d.	<i>delo</i> (file)
f.	<i>fond</i> (collection)
op.	<i>opis</i> (inventory)
p.	page
TsGAKR	<i>Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Kirgizskoi Respubliki</i> (Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic)
TsGAPDKR	<i>Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Politicheskoi Dokumentatsii Kirgizskoi Respubliki</i> (Central State Archive of Political Documentation of the Kyrgyz Republic)
TsGAKFFD	<i>Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Kinofonofoto-dokumentov</i> (Central State Archive of Kino-Photo-Phono Documents)

*To 'Aikam',  
for turning life into  
a dream so charming*





## ***Chapter 1***

### **Introduction**

The Kyrgyz, thanks especially to their former pastoral and nomadic type of social organization, have a vast body of diverse oral traditions, ranging from an outstanding heroic epic tradition to myths, folk songs, improvised oral poetry performances and oral poetry duels. The Kyrgyz heroic epic tradition, especially the *Manas* trilogy, has received substantial attention from scholars and travellers in the region since the mid-nineteenth century. These oral traditions have been studied not only for their narrative structures and methods of composition and transmission, but also for their importance as alternative sources of historiography. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to other forms of popular Kyrgyz oral traditions by Western scholarship, despite their popularity among the local populations and the significant roles they have played in the social and political life of the Kyrgyz. This book examines one such tradition, the genre of improvised oral poetry performances (*tökmö akynchylık*). These performances are improvisations about the contemporary and broader social, economic and political contexts in which the performance takes place. Improvisation is not an exception, as in other theatrical performances, songs, etc., but the most essential rule. However, during their performances, oral poets constantly reference historical events, cultural norms and values, and revered traditions when singing on a contemporary topic. They blend their lyrics with proverbs, sayings and aphorisms that are grounded in the collective memory of the Kyrgyz, merging 'the specific into the fixed and eternal' (Bloch 1975: 16), guaranteeing them a favourable reception from their audiences. The improvisational character of these traditional performances opens up a discursive field in which the past and the present connect with and inform each other, transforming oral poetry performances into a unique folk art that is traditional in form, yet modern in content.

In Kyrgyzstan today, improvised oral poetry performances are acclaimed as a distinguished national cultural heritage. The oral poets of earlier eras are highly regarded and are credited for preserving Kyrgyz

collective identity. The birthdays of famous oral poets of the past are celebrated as nationwide festivals, articles about their lives are widely published in newspapers and literary journals, and their performances are meticulously explored in scholarly works. Similarly, over the last two decades, oral poetry performances have witnessed an unprecedented surge in the social life of the Kyrgyz. An oral poet's opening performance has become a ritual component in a variety of celebratory gatherings, from life-cycle ceremonies to national holidays and election campaigns. In addition to solo performances, nearly all anniversary celebrations of notable people and regional festivals include, as the highlight of the occasion, an oral poetry competition where a group of oral poets, randomly matched in pairs, engage in a poetry duel in the form of a tournament. Dressed in traditional Kyrgyz robes and felt hats, Kyrgyz oral poets improvise their lines to the accompaniment of *komuz* (a stringed instrument). While a solo performance publicly validates the ceremonial event on which it is held, oral poetry duels have developed into ideal platforms where oral poets convey their opinions on the social, political and economic life of the country. The revival of cultural nationalism and the contemporaneity and prominence of the themes that oral poets sing about have turned improvised performances of oral poetry into one of the most popular traditional cultural performances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyz nation and its circumstances following the dissolution of the Soviet Union have become heated topics of these traditional cultural performances. During their performances, oral poets present themselves as staunch patriots and authentic representatives of the Kyrgyz nation who are concerned about the everyday lives of ordinary people. In the face of corruption, political instability, revolutions that removed two presidents within five years and disastrous economic conditions, the poets take the side of 'the people' while holding 'the politicians', accountable, chastising the latter for their incompetence, morality and lack of qualifications to rule the country. Yet, poets do not abstain from advising ordinary people on matters of common sense, cautioning them against ethnic clashes, possible future revolutions and ubiquitous popular demonstrations. As such, the present study sets out to explore how oral poets and their poetry have become so powerful among the Kyrgyz. What do these traditional cultural performances have to do with privatization policies, the high rates of inflation and newly introduced taxes? How can a young oral poet castigate the President of the country during these performances, which receive extensive media coverage? Is there any causal relationship between the recent expansion of these performances and the painful post-Soviet experiences of the Kyrgyz?

Lastly, how are these performances connected with the broader region with regard to the politics of cultural production in the post-Soviet era?

The number of such questions soared as I went around recording these performances in the field. In particular, the audience's reception of these performances as traditional was rather perplexing. How can these 'improvised' performances be traditional while their content is exclusively contemporary? What is traditional about these performances if the themes or the lyrics are not canonized? If a 29-year-old oral poet sings about the scandalous corruption reported concerning a foreign-owned gold-mining company, how does the audience connect this performance with the spiritual heritage of the Kyrgyz? Why do parents send their ten-year-old children to the oral poetry school if, one day, the latter will end up singing about the misdeeds of a runaway president? Observations in the field through a 'presentist' ethnography proved insufficient to provide well-rounded explanations of these initial questions. It would make no sense to witness a prestigious oral tradition become an integral element of Kyrgyz social life in the post-Soviet era without paying closer attention to the historical development of the institution of oral poetry. In actuality, both the poets and the broader public repeatedly referenced the long-term history of oral poetry performances among the Kyrgyz to explain the role of oral poets and their performances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, a thorough analysis of the phenomenon demanded that Kyrgyz oral poetry performances be researched through the perspective of a *longue durée*.

Starting with the late pre-revolutionary era, I ask what was the history of this tradition in the era before the Bolsheviks took control of the region in the 1920s? What roles did oral poets play in their communities, which were predominantly illiterate? If orality and improvisation were considered a low form of art from a modernist point of view – that is, in relation to literacy and Soviet 'high culture' – how did these performances survive the encompassing socialist modernization project? What roles did Kyrgyz oral poets play with their stage performances in the Soviet era? What did the 'voice of the ancestors' sound like on the socialist stage? How was *tökmö akynchylyk*, a traditional Kyrgyz cultural performance, reinvented as a socialist cultural performance? What does the history of *tökmö akynchylyk* in the Soviet era tell us more broadly about socialist modernization with regard to its politics of culture and its relationship with the ethnographic realities of the Kyrgyz? How can we explain the proliferation of these oral improvised performances after decades of socialist modernization, with their increasing literacy rates, spread of print, audio and visual media, and alleged Russification of local populations? What roles do the new generation of oral poets play among the Kyrgyz in the independence era? What can we learn

about the experiences of the Kyrgyz in the post-Soviet era through the language of the poets? What do the oral poets improvise regarding the social, political and economic conditions with which Kyrgyz are struggling today? These questions, referencing different historical periods, constitute an expanded version of the central question that this work sets out to explore: what role do local cultural resources play in the construction and maintenance of collective identities across a century of social, political and economic transformation?

Some classic works have documented the ways in which rituals, folklore and indigenous performances in traditional societies have played various roles in the social organization of their communities. While the ethnography of *tökmö akynchylyk* shares certain similarities with these works, I argue for the significance of long-term history in locating the processes of interactions between a traditional performance and its wider social and political context, as well as the ways in which they mutually inform both each other, and the wider public. In this sense, Kyrgyz oral poetry performances are unique due to improvisation being their principal characteristic. This historical ethnography therefore highlights improvisation as the main attribute of these performances, one which has enabled their centrality among the Kyrgyz across time, making it a tradition which has shown resilience due precisely to the mutable nature of improvisation.

This book, based on fourteen months of fieldwork and archival research, presents a historical ethnography of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances and explores the ways in which they have become an integral component of various modernization projects in the long-term history of the region. It offers a study of the growing popularity of these performances in the post-Soviet era on the one hand and the historical development of the institution of *tökmö akynchylyk* on the other. In particular, it documents the complex relationship between these performances and their patrons, the political elite, in the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras, as well as probing the impact of a shifting political economy on the performances and their performers, which have been embedded in the moral and political landscape of Kyrgyz society over the last century. In examining the cultural history of Kyrgyz oral poetry, the present study demonstrates the ability of its performers to accommodate their performances to new social, political and economic circumstances.

## **Themes and Approaches**

The theoretical framework of the present study draws on the anthropological literature on orality, morality and modernity. My discussion of orality includes the ways in which oral traditions could be considered a source of

historical knowledge. Moreover, I discuss the processes of the composition, transmission and performance of oral traditions, as well as their homeostatic nature. The impact of writing and literacy on the spoken word and the implications of literacy for non-traditional societies are also discussed in this section. I provide a survey of the literature on the study of oral poetry and poetry duels in traditional societies in order to provide a context for the similarities and differences between these works and the oral traditions of the Kyrgyz. A combination of these approaches provides the groundwork for putting into perspective the role of orality and oral poetry in a pastoral nomadic society which had been largely illiterate. Furthermore, building on insights from Maurice Bloch's work on oratory and political language, I discuss oratory as a form of social control through political language.

My discussion of morality has multiple aims. First, I consider Kyrgyz oral poetry performances to have played a significant role in the construction of the 'moral landscape' in different eras of Kyrgyz history. Despite the major differences in their messages, oral poets' didactic works in the pre-revolutionary era, discussed in Chapter 2, and Soviet-era oral poetry performances, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, both contributed to 'the creation of moral vocabularies, the circulation of moral values [and] the production of moral subjects' (Fassin 2012: 4) in their respective periods. Secondly, I consider the spread of these performances, as well as the growing public interest in them in the post-Soviet era in the context of the waves of retraditionalization that have taken place in post-Soviet countries, to be part of a general tendency to heal the effects of moral dispossession following the collapse of the previous moral order. What is more, oral poets have lent their voices to discourses of emerging collective identities, notably that of nationalism, in the post-Soviet era performances in which the category of the nation, which was ironically created through the nationality politics of the Soviet era, emerges as a moral community. Despite major political, social and economic transformations in the history of the Kyrgyz, *tökmö akynchylık* has been instrumental in the construction of the moral landscape through oral poets' songs containing moral messages that are compatible with the spirit of their times.

The final set of interconnected themes – modernity, transition and retraditionalization – are discussed with regard to the two opposing political trajectories that have been envisaged for the former socialist countries in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. These trajectories stem from diverse ideological viewpoints on the effects of socialist modernization in the region. They argue either that, following the administration of market-led reforms, a teleological path would emerge to transition to a Western-type democracy, or that post-Soviet countries with 'sturdy local cultures', which

were allegedly radically transformed through the Soviet experience, will have recourse to traditional ways of life. In this work, I suggest that neither argument concerning the trajectories of transition or alternatively retraditionalization adequately reflect the post-Soviet experiences of the Kyrgyz, just as the uniformity of socialist institutions did not necessarily result in a unified experience of the regime's politics by the diverse peoples of the Union. The Kyrgyz experience in the Soviet era, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, suggests that socialism as *the* alternative modernity was just as multiple, fragmented and entangled as its Western counterpart. Throughout my ethnography of the independence era, I argue that emerging collective identities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan point to an entangled web of the impacts of different projects of Sovietization, Westernization and nationalism, with glorifications of the deep past, as well as the influence of various transnational religious movements. Thus, I argue that the 'gate-keeping' concepts of transition and tradition should be abandoned to consider instead the post-Soviet experience of the Kyrgyz as the workings of multiple modernities in progress.

### ***Orality, Oratory and Oral Poetry***

One of the earliest anthropologists to treat oral traditions as alternative sources of historical knowledge, to explore them through ethnographic methods and to offer a research methodology is Jan Vansina (1965, 1985). In his preface to *Oral Traditions*, where he calls oral traditions 'historical sources of a special nature' and attempts to outline various historical methodologies in oral literature studies, he emphasizes the significance of oral traditions for their audiences in societies without writing: 'The listeners, motionless and intent, follow every word that is spoken, and there can be no doubt that to them these words bring the past back to life, for they are venerable words that provide the key to the storehouse of wisdom of the ancestors who worked, loved, and suffered in times gone by' (1965: xi). However, the value attached to oral traditions by those who exercise them does not necessarily determine attitudes towards them in the literature. In his summary of the main attitudes to the treatment of oral traditions in the anthropological literature, Vansina (1965: 8-10) dismisses those views which either consider oral traditions lacking in any reliability (e.g. Lowie 1917) or assume *a priori* value regarding the credibility of these traditions simply because of their oral nature (e.g. Van Gennep 1910; Hartland 1914). His attitude is closer to that of Edward Sapir (1949), who claims that 'oral traditions have the "ring of history", but also insists that they must be checked against other historical sources before valid use can be made of



them' (Vansina 1965: 10).<sup>1</sup> In his criticism of the functionalist school, Vansina points to the functionalists' refusal to 'reconstruct the past history of primitive tribes in the absence of written documents and archaeological evidence' (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Referencing the example of Meyer Fortes (1945), Vansina criticizes adherents of the functionalist school for laying so much stress on the function of oral tradition that 'they reach the stage of refusing to admit that it could contain any valid information concerning the past' (Vansina 1965: 12). In comparison, he finds Evans-Pritchard's approach considerably milder, since 'he considers that oral traditions can be used as historical sources even if they are for the most part untrustworthy, since history always has a conjectural quality, and truthfulness in the reconstruction of the past is always a matter of degree' (Vansina 1965: 13).<sup>2</sup> Vansina ends his discussion of the literature by maintaining that, although the majority of the historical and anthropological sources on the subject indicate that the value of oral traditions as historical evidence is a problem to be solved, none provides a general discussion of oral traditions as a source of information about the past (Vansina 1965: 18).

In his discussion of oral traditions and the impact of the script within the context of the oral poetry of Africa and ancient Greece, Jack Goody points to the problem of accuracy in oral traditions:

Without a written text, it is difficult for anyone to know whether two versions of a long recitation are the 'same' or not. Even the deliberate intention of the author to produce an identical version of a song is thwarted by the impossibility of juxtaposition, of visual checking – only sequential comparison, often with long time intervals, is possible (Goody 1999: 88).

For Goody, verbatim memory can only flourish in literate societies under certain conditions, such as the existence of 'a fixed original' and the impact of schooling on the development of 'decontextualized' memory tasks, a process which 'removes learning from doing' (1999: 188). In purely oral cultures, oral traditions are composed and transmitted not through verbatim recalling, as in literate cultures, but 'generative recalling', since the

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<sup>1</sup> 'The village to village movements of clans or septs recorded in various West Coast mythologies, for instance, certainly all have the ring of history or, better said, of legend based on historical events, for the motives and attentive circumstances of such movements are frequently enough fanciful in character' (Sapir 1949: 395-396).

<sup>2</sup> 'History is part of the conscious tradition of a people and is operative in their social life. It is the collective representation of events as distinct from events themselves. This is what the social anthropologist calls myth. The functionalist anthropologists regard history in this sense, usually a mixture of fact and fancy, as highly relevant to a study of the culture of which it forms part' (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 121). For further discussion of the theme, also see Evans-Pritchard (1958).

performance of a piece of oral poetry takes place in central contexts of cultural life. Drawing on Goody's scholarship, Walter Ong also refers to the ideas of 'visual checking' and the 'fixed original' as something unthinkable in oral cultures:

Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back – 'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. *They are occurrences, events* (Ong 2004: 31).

Furthermore, the act of generative recalling also poses certain challenges due to the fact that oral traditions are likely to be recalled, or more correctly re-created, depending on the new context and fashioned after certain social and political changes in a given community. Jack Goody and Ian Watt discuss the social aspects of remembering and how the transmission of cultural heritage through memory is subject to modifications over time:

The social function of memory - and of forgetting - can thus be seen as the final stage of what may be called the homeostatic organization of the cultural tradition in non-literate society... What continues to be of social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually forgotten: and language - primarily vocabulary - is the effective medium of this crucial process of social digestion and elimination which may be regarded as analogous to the homeostatic organization of the human body by means of which it attempts to maintain its present condition of life (Goody and Watt 2005: 30-31).

While these authors suggest that 'writing' fixes a piece of information and does not allow it to change over time (in contrast to disadvantages of memorizing and recalling), neither Goody and Watt nor Ong question the reliability of orally transmitted knowledge. On the contrary, for them the fact that oral transmission could be impaired in terms of accuracy, since no checking mechanisms are available, could tell us more about the social change that takes place in a given society since oral traditions are homeostatic and reflective of change, rather than being static and unresponsive.

Vansina, according to whom not all oral sources are oral traditions, limits his definition of oral traditions to reported statements, whether spoken or sung, concerning the past, and transmitted from one person to another by

word of mouth.<sup>3</sup> At this stage, he draws clear boundaries between the written and oral registers, implying the impact of the former on the latter, though he does not assume any hierarchical relationship between them. Likewise, attention to the relations of the oral, orality and literacy has been problematized by Goody, especially with regard to the broader implications of these relations in the social organization of traditional societies (1992, 1999, 2000, 2005). In *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Goody draws attention to the structuralist fallacy of drawing a crude dichotomy between traditional and modern societies with regard to whether or not they have writing:

At least during the past 2000 years, the vast majority of the peoples of the world (most of Eurasia and much of Africa) have lived...in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups or individuals who could read or write... It is clear that even if one's attention is centered only upon village life, there are large areas of the world where the fact of writing and existence of the book has to be taken into account, even in discussing 'traditional' societies (2005: 4-5).

In his discussion of the composition, performance and transmission of oral traditions, Goody points to the critical categorization of oral and literate societies and suggests that, 'The problem raised here is the degree of influence that the presence of another register, another channel of communication, has on any specific "oral" composition, genre or author, when both exist within the same, or possibly neighboring societies'. He also warns that 'almost no "oral" form can be unaffected by the presence of written communication, especially as the latter is so often associated with high status of one kind or another' (1999: 82).

This point informs his firm position on the definition of 'oral culture', which has been adopted by many other authors on this topic. For Goody, an 'oral culture' is one which has yet to be influenced by the presence of writing. Accordingly, even the presence of a religion of the book in a culture does not make it purely oral due to the influence of (the) script. For the interaction between the written and oral registers, he suggests that, rather than the physical existence of the book itself, even 'the circulation of the written word' suffices to exclude that society from having a strictly defined oral culture (Goody 2000; see also Ong 2004). Taking this argument further, he suggests that, through their research on the Yugoslav epics, Parry (1930) and Lord (1960) draw wrong conclusions about the Homeric poems having

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<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that we should dismiss other oral sources that do not fit his definition of oral traditions as worthless: 'all traditions communicating information about the past may be regarded as historical sources' (Vansina 1965: 19).

been created in an oral culture: 'Both Homer's work and the Yugoslav epics, like most epics, are products of early literate cultures even if they are performed orally ... the formulaic composition of the Greeks, and even the very pervasive use of rhyme, seem to be rare in cultures without writing' (Goody 2000: 26).<sup>4</sup>

Arguing against the Great Divide theory<sup>5</sup> and the structuralist fallacy of dichotomizing hot vs. cold societies and bracketing them with science vs. magic, or history vs. myth, Goody suggests that these binary categories are 'far from exemplifying universal reason', being 'a parochial by-product of mental habits induced by writing' (Hart 2011: 8). Especially in his discussion of orality and literacy, for Goody the presence of writing promotes a different course of development which does not amount to a 'great divide' but gives way to different trajectories of historical development<sup>6</sup>, which, he suggests, is one of the indications of the distinctiveness of Eurasian societies<sup>7</sup>, one such trajectory leading to a causal relationship between writing and hegemony.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Oratory and Social Control***

Bloch's edited volume on political language and oratory (1975) explores the ways in which power could be exercised through oratory as a political tool in traditional societies. Some of the articles in Bloch's volume draw attention to the role of oral literature and oratory as an avenue to achieving and exercising power (Salmond 1975: 45) by describing the dependence of patrons on orators to give expression to their political interests and to persuade their listeners through staged oratorical performances (Hobart

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<sup>4</sup> He cites the case of the memorization of Quranic verses in otherwise oral cultures as another example of the impact of the written on the oral (Goody 2000: 99-103). See his discussion of restricted literacy through the influence of religions of the book (Goody 2000: 156, 160).

<sup>5</sup> Goody responds to Levi-Strauss' *Savage Mind* (1966) by giving a provocative title to one of his works on literacy, *Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977).

<sup>6</sup> A lengthy discussion of this point can be found in 'Objections and Refutations' in Goody (2000: 1-25).

<sup>7</sup> For Goody, techniques of agriculture and means of communication resulted in social organizations which are noticeably similar in Europe and Asia, in contrast to those developed in sub-Saharan Africa. Different techniques of agriculture led to different means and relations of production, and the development of alphabetic writing was complementary to these processes (2006: 154-179). See Hart (2011) for a broader discussion of 'Goody's Vision of World History'.

<sup>8</sup> It is also important to note the relationship between writing and hegemony: 'its [writing's] introduction usually involves the domination of the non-literate segment of the population by the literate one ... Where writing is, "class" cannot be far away' (Goody 1999: xv).

1975: 66), thus emphasizing the close links between oratory and authority (Turton 1975: 163).

Bloch argues that political anthropologists have tended to look at conflict situations in traditional societies to understand how control and power are exercised. However, this emphasis on concrete political events misses what Bloch calls the 'everyday control' that is established through the language of politics. Drawing attention to the dialogue between anthropology and linguistics, Bloch argues for the significance of the relationship between 'forms of speech acts and social control' (1975: 5). His introduction is based on his main argument that the formalization of political language restricts what can be said. When communicating messages about a particular event, the language of traditional authority often makes reference to a body of illustrations from proverbs and scriptures. Such a reference to general illustrations in a given speech reduces the specificity of utterances and merges that particular event with events which are assumed to be eternal and fixed: 'The individuality and historicity of events disappear since, irrespective of minor differences, these events are all like the scriptural examples' (1975: 15). The greatest social effect of this merging, Bloch argues, is to rule out the possibility of disagreement, since 'one cannot disagree with the right order' (1975: 16). Thus, formalized oratory and political language appear as a form of social control since they lead back to traditional power, the coercion of which can only be avoided by avoiding the formalized oratory. Bloch emphasizes the effect of formalization with reference to the eternal and fixed to such an extent that he leaves the speaker without any agency:

The way formalization removes the tie between speech and particular event, has a yet even more dramatic result. It removes the authority and the event from the speaker himself so that he speaks when using formalization less and less for himself and more and more for his role. This explains the inability of the speaker to manipulate his power for strictly personal ends (1975: 16).

Bloch concludes that, since the creative potential of speech is restricted through formalization, an utterance can only be followed by a few or possibly only one other utterance, rather than being hypothetically followed by a multitude of alternatives (1975: 18). Parkin summarizes Bloch's emphasis on the formalization of political language and its effect as follows: 'Through the predictability of its forms, it confirms the speaker's authority, validates his right to impose demands on an audience, blocks dissident replies, and in general stifles creativity in speech' (1984: 349). However, Parkin (1984) and Werbner (1977) both claim that the thesis put forward in the introduction is refuted by the articles in the very same volume showing

that oratory and political language combine elements of formalization and creativity, rather than the one restricting the other (Comaroff 1975: 141-161; Parkin 1975: 113-139).

Robert Paine's edited volume (1981) contrasts with Bloch's. It is not only the geographical difference in ethnographic focus – Paine's volume is mainly on English-speaking Western examples – which differentiates it from the earlier volume. The analytic focus is also different in that Paine, unlike Bloch, privileges the creative capacities of the speaker and his audience. For Paine, persuasion (Bloch's social control) through rhetoric is negotiated between the speaker and the audience, and no 'taken-for-granted submission' to formalized political language is expected. Political language is a way of exerting political persuasion through negotiation, whereas for Bloch political language reinforces traditional authority where there is no room for negotiation.

David Parkin (1984) offers an extensive survey of the field, arguing that the study of political oratory and rhetoric were neglected by earlier generations of anthropologists. Although myths, legends and fairy tales were recorded, they were usually interpreted as charters for authority and were explained as embedded cultural features. In the well-known case of Malinowski, for instance, Parkin reminds us that every Trobriand folktale is owned by a member of the community and can only be recited by him. However, myths belong to clans and justify their claims to territory. Even if these tales are owned by individuals, 'Malinowski himself notes that "not all the 'owners' know how to thrill and to raise a hearty laugh, which is one of the main ends of such stories. A good raconteur has to change his voice in the dialogue, chant the ditties with due temperament, gesticulate, and in general play to the gallery"' (Malinowski 1926: 80, cited in Parkin 1984: 345).

A systematic interest in the performative aspect of speech, rather than the validating aspect epitomized in the example of Malinowski above, developed as a result of the works of Dell Hymes on the ethnography of speaking, his first such work appearing in 1962. However, Parkin adds that, while ethnographers of speaking have produced a rich body of work, the main impetus for work on political language and oratory came about as a result of changing ideas of the political rather than the uses of language (Hymes 1962). The works of F. G. Bailey on committees (1965) and formal political speech-making (1969) have sparked an interest in similar studies among other anthropologists. Although anthropologists had always analysed language use, 'observations of language use recorded in notebooks rarely became the "data" of the polished publications of political structures and processes' (Parkin 1984: 346).

### *Oral Poetry and Politics*

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw an explosion of scholarly interest in performance studies, especially in the fields of linguistic anthropology and folklore, the most notable examples being Hymes (1981), Tedlock (1983), Bauman (1984, 1989), Bauman and Briggs (1990) and Finnegan (1992). These works explored oral poetry and folklore in general as a 'communicative event'. Also, a new emphasis on performance 'directed attention away from study of the formal patterning and symbolic content of texts<sup>9</sup> to the emergence of verbal art in the social interaction between performers and audience' (Baumann and Briggs 1990: 59-60). These authors situate oral poetry in a wider perspective in order to pay greater attention to 'the dialectic between performance and its wider sociocultural and political-economic context' (ibid.: 61). The central shift in performance studies 'consists in displacing the primary object of textual analysis from linguistic form to the actualization of form in a public display' (Hanks 1989: 111), thus challenging earlier structural accounts which privileged texts over events.

As a traditional form of literary expression, the term 'oral poetry' refers to 'poems that are unwritten either because the cultures in which they occur are partially or wholly nonliterate (like the traditional native cultures of Africa, Australia, Oceania, and America) or because oral forms are cherished despite a population's overall literacy' (Finnegan 1992: 119).<sup>10</sup> Although not entirely clearly differentiated as a category, oral poetry, broadly speaking, can refer to songs, epics, mythological chants, ballads and folk music. The qualities which make a piece of poetry oral poetry are its modes of composition, transmission and performance, all of which have been discussed extensively in the disciplines of anthropology, history, linguistics, folklore and ethnomusicology.

The topic of the composition of oral poetry has implications for debates over orality and literacy due to the fact that the way an epic, for instance, is composed can say more about the social organization of ancient societies, whether those societies were purely oral or had limited literacy. Modes of transmission bring out discussions of both memorization and apprenticeship, which are relevant especially in debates on the authenticity of a piece of oral poetry and the impact of social change on oral traditions in

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<sup>9</sup> This refers to older oral-formulaic theory of which Parry and Lord's work on Yugoslav epics (1953), a thorough study of epic language and oral verse-making, is one of the prime examples. See also (Foley 1985, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Accidentally or not, in this definition, Finnegan follows Goody's concept of Eurasia as a distinct civilizational experience, see also Finnegan (1988: 141-142).



general. There is overall agreement in the literature that no piece of oral poetry can be memorized verbatim and transmitted as such and that it is a new creation every time it is sung, depending on the occasion, the reaction of the audience and the mood of the performer (Vansina 1965; Finnegan 1988, 1992; Goody 1992, 1999, 2005; Ong 2004). Its performance, which is more relevant to the aims of this chapter, gives prominence to the audience, as the combination of performer, channel and audience make the poem an event in a social context.<sup>11</sup> This is also the occasion on which the transmission of cultural norms and values take place in a given society.

Ruth Finnegan suggests that adopting a comparative perspective on oral poetry can create awareness of the ‘complexity and diversity of forms throughout human culture and history, and cast doubt on crude dichotomies used by social scientists in the past – that between “civilized” as against “primitive” and “simple” society, for instance; or *Gesellschaft* opposed to *Gemeinschaft*; or “modern” as against “traditional” culture’ (1992: 3). She stresses the importance of a performance-based study of oral poetry, which she describes as

a form of activity which can be considered as both an expressive and a socially significant aspect of human action, a form in which human beings use and develop artistically marked conventions to formulate and manipulate and actively create their own human existence and the world around them (1992: xvi; cf. Abu-Lughod 1986).

The performance of oral poetry is the occasion on which its effect can be discussed in traditional societies. Stressing the performative aspect of oral poetry, Finnegan argues that in a traditional society, ‘oral poetry has no existence or continuity apart from its performance’, and she suggests that ‘any piece of oral poetry must, to be fully understood, be seen in its context; that it is not a separable thing but a “communicative event”’ (1992: 22-23) (see also Ben-Amos 1972).

Lila Abu-Lughod’s work on Bedouin poetic discourse (1986) and Steven Caton’s ethnography of poetry among tribal Yemenis (1984, 1990) both highlight the performative aspect of the art of speaking and its centrality in the political life of their respective communities. In her work, Abu-Lughod argues that, ‘despite the frequency with which scholars of Arab culture comment on the high value Arabs place on poetry, few have tried to

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Oral poems are more than just texts, for they rely essentially on performance for their realization’ (Finnegan 1992: 124). ‘Whereas in literate cultures an individual can go off alone with a book, in oral cultures another partner is needed as narrator or instructor...the act of being alone, communicating to oneself, is sometimes regarded with some suspicion in oral cultures...’ (Goody 1992: 18). See also Durkheim’s discussion of mechanical solidarity in traditional societies (Durkheim 1997).

situate this poetry in its living social context' (1986: 28). While scholars paid attention to classical literary poetry, they did not consider one of the major issues of oral tradition: 'the social context of performed poetry' (1986: 28). Thus, going beyond the old notions of folklore, Abu-Lughod argues that expressions of sentiment through poetic discourse contribute to the representation of the self in social life, and that these representations are ultimately linked to morality and politics in the broadest sense (1986: 34).

Caton's work (1984) is based on the premise that poetry is tied to political conflict. He focuses mainly on the use of poetic exchanges in mediating disputes, arguing that among the rural tribal Yemenis, 'poetry is an act embedded in socio-historical reality; an aggressive instrument like swords or rifles but brandished in a verbal war of political rhetoric' (1984: 8). His later work (1990), an ethnography of poetry, is a good example of an anthropological contribution which emphasizes the central role artful speaking plays in the sociopolitical order of segmentary communities in the Middle East: 'Poetry in tribal Yemen is both the creation of art and the production of social and political reality in the same act of composition' (1990: 21). Among rural Yemenis, the performance of poetry is an integral part of their everyday lives, a social and political commentary which reinforces tribal ideology and concepts of the self (1990: 22). At another level, tribal poetry is also a means for the tribes to become more involved in state politics through the spread of their poetry, while in return the state also attempts to control this means of poetic communication in order to disseminate its own ideology (1990: 23). One of the poetic genres that Caton explores in his ethnography is *balah*, a verbal duel in the form of spontaneously and competitively created poems, usually sung at weddings. He argues that the act of composing a poem in these competitions is also 'an act of constructing the self, an aim consonant with a larger purpose: to demonstrate that in the form and content of artistic acts, structures and meanings of a society are created' (1990: 112).

In her extensive discussion of oral poetry, Finnegan argues that it can serve to uphold the *status quo* (see also Malinowski 1926; Gluckman 1965), maintain social order through its performance in a ceremonial setting or constitute an 'act of sociability'. She goes on to discuss other commonly found effects of its performance, which may include:

Rituals of healing; ventilating disputes; exerting social sanctions against offenders or outsiders; communicating in an oblique but comprehensible form truth which could not be expressed in more ordinary ways ... adding solemnity and public validation to ceremonial occasions; providing comfort and some means of social action for the bereaved or oppressed ... (Finnegan 1992: 243).

Emphasizing the readiness of oral poetry to lend itself to ideological use, Finnegan maintains that it has been used for propaganda purposes: ‘On a less public but equally effective level are the poets and reciters encouraged by government or political parties to give performance of poetry designed to put their own case – the various singers, for instance, hired by opposing political parties ...’ (1992: 158-159). Her extensive survey of oral poetry performances, from the Indian government’s birth control campaigns to verbal duels of poets hired by opposing political parties during the 1957 elections in western Nigeria to the Tanzanian government’s dependence on poetry to propagate socialism in 1967, further confirms the political and ideological role oral poetry has played across the world, including among societies with writing.

### ***Duelling with Words***

The phenomenon of duelling with words, poetry or songs has existed in a broad range of societies across the world, in the form of song duels among Central Eskimos (Eckert and Newmark 1980), Basques (Frank 1989) or Gayo society in Indonesia (Bowen 1989), attracting the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists and linguists.<sup>12</sup> The duels surveyed in the literature are explored as competitive exchanges between two parties, and they usually highlight a pattern of abuse, insult and derision, demonstrations of masculinity through performance. The social implications of duelling with words as a public performance also vary, from venting aggressiveness and the release of tension to forms of judicial instruments, reinforcing the status quo, the maintenance of social equilibrium, and critical reflections on social and political change, etc.

Penelope Eckert and Russell Newmark’s work on Central Eskimo song duels (1980) analyses seventeen duelling songs of Eskimos collected in the 1920s and 1930s. After reviewing several works on song duels, the authors conclude that earlier works dealing with the role of song duels in social life considered them to be judicial instruments (Hoebel 1954), as a means of compelling conformity with social rules (Spencer 1959) or as cathartic for built-up pressures and frustrations (Foulks 1972; see also Gluckman 1965). They argue that such studies ‘concentrated on the event as an isolated means of resolving conflicts without considering if and how it

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<sup>12</sup> Here is a summary list of literature on duelling with words: Hoebel (1954); Abrahams (1962); Dundes, Leach, and Özkök (1970); Lefever (1981); Erdener (1987); Frank (1989); Caton (1990); Van der Toorn (1991); Schwebel (1997); Yaqub (2007); Dubuisson (2009, 2010, 2017); Pagliai (2009).

actually did accomplish its purpose, and without placing it in the larger context in which it operated' (Eckert and Newmark 1980: 191).<sup>13</sup>

Another significant study of verbal duels is John Bowen's work on poetry duels among the Gayo of Indonesia (1989). Bowen argues that changes in society and politics impel people to remodel their verbal performances. Adopting a *longue durée* perspective, he explores 'how integration of Gayo society into colonial and postcolonial sociopolitical framework opens up poetic duel performances to competing political voices' (1989: 25).<sup>14</sup> In terms of the political implications of verbal performances, Bowen mentions state sponsorship of these events to celebrate the state's achievements and their political use as one of the central avenues for national election campaigns. He further maintains that the state has had to control these improvised performances, as they are 'oriented towards the description of current events' and are therefore in danger of contradicting the state's messages (1989: 34).<sup>15</sup> After drawing attention to a growing body of research on the social implication of public performances involving dialogue<sup>16</sup>, Bowen's work suggests three stages in constructing the links between poetic texts and their sociohistorical context: 'studying how sociopolitical processes lead to restructuring verbal performances', 'analyzing the capacity of performances to comment on or model sociopolitical relations' and 'tracing historical changes in relative openness or to use Bakhtin's term "dialogic" character of the performances' (Bowen 1989: 35). As for the role of poets in their communities, Bowen argues that 'the performer subordinates his own voice to the age-old cultural truths' (1989: 35).

### ***Morality***

The literature on the anthropology of morality has been growing in recent decades (Howell 1997; Widlok 2004; Lambek 2010; Fassin 2012). In his *Companion to Moral Anthropology*, Didier Fassin acknowledges that the field of ethics and morality is not a theoretically homogenous realm, and he offers a very insightful summary of the background to two diverse trends in

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<sup>13</sup> More recent works on verbal duels, such as Frank (1989) and Pagliai (2009), focus on the effects of oral poetry as inculcators of civic virtue and social solidarity, vehicles for barbed satire and social protest, and means of venting aggression against power (cf. Erdener 1987; Yaqub 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Here, Bowen makes a reference to Bakhtin's 'dialogical imagination' (1981).

<sup>15</sup> If not controlled, these poetry performances could become a vehicle for expressions of dissent. A similar political concern for epics does not exist in state politics, for instance, as they are more text-based oral performances, and thus easier to censor.

<sup>16</sup> Most prominently Dundes, Leach and Özkök (1970), Bauman (1984) and Urban (1986).

the study of morality and ethics in anthropology, one Durkheimian drawing on a Kantian genealogy (deontological ethics), the other Foucaultian with an Aristotelian genealogy (virtue ethics). In this work, I find it useful to consider morality in the Durkheimian sense. Following the lead of Fassin and Lambek, therefore, I will use morality as referring to culturally bound values and acceptable social behaviour that is associated with what is good or bad, rather than what is right or wrong. As Caroline Humphrey argues of Mongolia (1992), the historical origins in Kyrgyz culture are a source of moral authority in the present, and oral traditions, especially epics and *tökmö akyncylyk*, are among the rare phenomena through which contemporary Kyrgyz relate to their distant, 'deep' past. As in Bowen's analysis of Gayo oral performances, rural Kyrgyz relate to age-old customs and traditions through a revered body of oral traditions, the moral authority of the past ensuring the solidarity of the community in the present (cf. Light 2008; Cash 2011). Thus, respect for poets and their performances also becomes a moral act, as these performances offer public validation for ceremonial events and a means of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) through which Kyrgyz take a pride in their collective identities in the post-Soviet era.<sup>17</sup>

My discussion of morality aims also to explore the concept of dispossession. It draws on the premises that both Soviet socialism and the post-Soviet era provide a type of moral order (Humphrey 1992; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Steinberg and Wanner 2008; Hann 2011), despite the fact that these moralities are based on different and sometimes contradictory foundations (secular vs. religious, collective vs. the self). In the words of Mark Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, 'The fall of the old order has often engendered feelings of loss and disorder, stimulating desires to rebuild community and heal divisions' (2008: 3). These feelings of loss and disorder arose out of the breakdown of the moral community of the past: 'We need to recognize that however coercive Soviet socialism often was, it provided a type of moral community, a sense of integration, order, and shared values' (2008: 3).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Nathan Light's work on Uyghur musical performances (2008) also attests to the centrality of revered musical traditions in Uyghur social life: 'No formal gathering...was complete without a performance of at least one *muqam* song and, frequently, descriptions of the great value and significance of this tradition' (2008: 1).

<sup>18</sup> 'Moral breakdown' as I use the term here relates to the broader social experience. As such it diverges from Zigon's use, in which he forgoes the Durkheimian focus on the society for the sake of the self: 'a distinction must be made between the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life and the conscious ethical tactics performed in the ethical moment, or what I have also called the moral breakdown' (Zigon 2007: 148). For a reaction to Zigon on the basis of the importance of society in the study of morality, see Yan (2014).

In his call for the recognition of the 'social transformation of the moral order' in the post-Soviet world, Chris Hann, who coined the phrase 'moral dispossession', argues that 'the dramatic collapse of Soviet socialism meant the end of a moral order in this sense, comprising both the termination of practical ways of life and the sudden calling into question of a *Weltanschauung*, of most people's taken-for-granted knowledge of the world in which they lived' (2011: 7). He proposes that collectivization at the beginning of Soviet socialism and decollectivization after its demise were both processes of material dispossession, which, equally inevitably, brought about an institutional and moral caesura, as Marxist ideology aspired to create a secular public morality. Alongside the material dispossession, 'traditional bastions of moral values had been attacked', and socialism offered an alternative, secular vision of morality against those of religious and 'superstition' (2011: 31). According to Hann, what is at stake with moral dispossession in the post-Soviet world lies in people's search for 'other forms of absolute commitment' which can lead to the rise of populist sensibilities and an 'increasingly exclusive and intolerant patriotism' (2011: 32), as in the case of Kalb's analysis of neo-nationalism in Poland (2009).

Both Hann's and Steinberg and Wanner's emphases on the disruption of the moral order after Soviet socialism collapsed resonate with the relevant literature on the resurgence of the search for alternative sources of collective identity to replace socialist morality. Humphrey's works on post-Soviet Mongolia (1992, 1997) bear some resemblance to Hann's formulation of moral dispossession and the possible ways out of it. Humphrey argues that 'the moral authority of the socialist period was based on a vision of a future society, which was to be egalitarian, industrialized and single-minded' (1992: 375). However, with the demise of the Soviet Union, Mongolians became disillusioned with this vision of socialist morality and found themselves looking for alternative forms of collective identity, a Durkheimian moral order, and thus tried to create 'a "true Mongolian" moral society' rooted in national identity and promoted by nationalist groups such as the National Renaissance Movement. Humphrey illustrates the 'atmosphere of self-doubt' experienced by Mongols in a way that is analogous to other post-Soviet countries:

The Mongols are now in the process of rethinking their 'deep past', not only because this is for once their own, but because historical origin in Mongolian culture is the source of moral authority in the present. Thus the 'deep past' is being called upon to provide inspiration for a discontinuity with the immediate past (1992: 375).

Similarly, Ingeborg Baldauf suggests that Central Asians today are trying to 'cope or come to terms with the past and present'. They are experiencing 'a

loss of certainty that brings about new options and difficulties that call for reorientation yet again. Real lives in Central Asia today unfold against a *dispositif* of phenomena that can be characterized as “messy” at best’, which results from a constellation of factors, including

the demise of the Soviet Union and the ensuing necessity for new states to be built up on politically shifting ground, or for existing states to rebuild themselves with massive foreign intervention while cherishing the illusion of self-determination; the demise of the state-planned economy, which for individuals and groups resulted in the challenge to accommodate to hesitantly emerging economic models theoretically based on competition, but in real life demanding no less cooperation than before; and the erosion, or at least verbal devaluation, of ideological premises on a large and small scale, which opened the way for plurality, but also resulted in restriction and determinism (Baldauf 2013a: 5-6).

Gerald Creed’s analysis of folkloric re-enactments in post-Soviet Bulgaria (2011) explores another form of dispossession, that is, cultural dispossession. Through an ethnography of mumming rituals (*kukeri*) in the country, Creed argues for the cultural significance of these events, as they offer insights into topics of concern to social theorists such as civil society, gender equality, nationalism, democracy, etc., and asks why these ‘extant cultural resources’ go unrecognized.<sup>19</sup> He concludes that, due to the seemingly successful Bulgarian transition to a market economy, epitomized by its accession to European Union, ‘the cultural options/ alternatives evident in *kukeri* are being eroded and reformed before they can be recognized, a process I characterize as cultural dispossession’ (2011: 4). Paraphrasing Creed, cultural dispossession is a process through which rituals and other folkloric events, which are intimate and integrative elements of people’s lives, are stripped of their intrinsic values through their non-acknowledgement by national or international actors in the post-Soviet era. For Creed this trend is unfortunate, since these rituals are organic parts of the social lives of local people, more so than the modernizing mechanisms and institutions of Western liberal democracy:

Lack of recognition and use of these potential building materials made subsequent efforts to construct democratic or capitalist structures ‘from scratch’ more alien and difficult, which produced a self-validating circularity in which the problems or failures could

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<sup>19</sup> For comparison see Jennifer Cash, who critically assesses the recent cultural policies of EU institutions in the case of Moldova, comparing them with Soviet politics of cultural production: ‘both assume and assign social roles to artists without regard for the roles that artists claim for themselves’ (Cash 2007: 1410).

then be blamed on the lack of indigenous traditions, the planners having (dis)missed those that were extant because they did not match preconceived models. This dynamic validates the Western model itself as it remains unchallenged by the very difficulties it encounters, which are always displaced to the lack or failings of the society in transition (2011: 5-6).

A combination of moral and cultural dispossession can be documented through the study of oral poetry performances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. As a source of moral order, this oral tradition has been on the rise since the end of socialism, being treasured by both rural and urban Kyrgyz as a rare ritual occasion, one that might serve as a good example of Durkheim's 'effervescent assembly' (1995) and/ or Turner's *communitas* (1969, 1988), as it is where moral messages are sung to enthusiastic audiences.<sup>20</sup> Poetry performances are seen as important aspects of the moral landscape in rural Kyrgyzstan, nurturing the values of integration, order and shared values against the sense of moral dispossession. Thus, one of the ways in which I explore these performances and the role of poets in their communities is to look at the place of these ritual performances in the social transformation of moral order in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

At the level of cultural dispossession, I demonstrate that, regardless of the ignorance of state institutions and NGOs, for the broader public these cultural performances are attractive since they bring together the old and the new, the historical and the contemporary, the traditional and the modern. Each and every oral poetry performance that took place during my fieldwork was paid for either by the hosts of the event and private organizations, or through public money raised especially for that event in a particular region (*marafon*). In order to 'sell' their art, oral poets not only have to relate to the lives of the people by singing about the decaying economy, corrupt politics and the glorification of the past, they also have constantly to improve their skills of improvisation, repertoires of melodies and performative skills. With few exceptions, however, most professional oral poets have to work in multiple jobs to earn a living and feed their families. Thus, the primary concerns of today's oral poets are the lack of state support and sponsorship for these stage performances and the precariousness of their lives and art. Cultural dispossession, then, is not only an analytical tool, but a concept used by many of the poets themselves, especially when they refer to the prestigious working conditions of their masters during the Soviet era.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a comparative reading of Durkheim's collective effervescence and Turner's *communitas*, see Olaveson (2001).

<sup>21</sup> In Chapter 6, I discuss a press conference where an oral poet uttered the following lines: 'Our civilization has been in a coma for the last twenty-three years'.



### ***Central Asia between Transition, Retrationalization and Modernity***

A large body of literature has already been devoted to the uncertainties experienced through the transition to a market economy in post-Soviet countries and the various ways in which local people have attempted to cope with them. A great part of this scholarship observed a trend towards a revived interest in the search for sources of collective identities, religion and popular nationalist ideologies figuring most prominently among them (Tishkov 1997; Berdahl 1999; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Hann et al. 2003; Steinberg and Wanner 2008; Rasanayagam 2011). The case of Kyrgyzstan has been no different in this sense: most of the social science literature addressing the transition in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan focuses on the resurgence of religious movements and the religious conversion or more populist forms of post-Soviet nationalism as alternative sources of collective identity (Heyat 2004; Borbieva 2007; Kuchumkulova 2007; Montgomery 2007; Pelkmans 2009; Isci 2010; Akçali and Engin-Demir 2013).

In the words of John Anderson, Kyrgyzstan ‘has made something of a name for itself since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under President Askar Akayev, Kyrgyzstan has been described as the “Switzerland of the East” and characterized as an “island of democracy” floating in a sea of authoritarian regimes’ (1999: 99). For those who supported the notion of rapid and linear processes of change, Kyrgyzstan was the prime example of a successful transition to a market economy. The open commitment to market-led reforms, the degree of social pluralism and the number of religious associations and non-governmental organizations suggested that Kyrgyzstan was making a great leap forward by seemingly conforming to the preconceived Western models of the market society: ‘Kyrgyzstan was among the fastest neoliberal reformers in the former Soviet Union. Collective farms were dissolved and rural households endowed with private property rights over arable land, livestock, infrastructure and machinery’ (Steimann 2011: xiii).

With reference to religious plurality in the country, or what Mathijs Pelkmans calls the ‘religious marketplace’ (2006), Anderson states that ‘Even more impressive, however, has been the growth in the number of religious associations, from around fifty which existed legally when Gorbachev came to power to nearly two thousand today’ (Anderson 1999: 99). Moreover, Pelkmans’ study of conversions to Christianity in Kyrgyzstan suggests that ‘Kyrgyzstan has one of the highest densities of Christian missionaries in the Muslim world’ (Pelkmans 2009: 1). In addition to the discourse of religious freedom, the proliferation of non-governmental

organizations also ensured that 'a healthy transition' was taking place by building up civil society. While in 1996 the number of non-governmental organizations in Kyrgyzstan was around 800 (Kasybekov 1999), in 2006 there were more than 8,000 (Ubysheva and Pogojev 2006: 8). According to one source (Heap and Garbutt 2002), Kyrgyzstan had the highest density of non-governmental organizations in Central Asia: 'It may be explained by the fact that at the dawn of sovereignty, during its first years, Kyrgyzstan took a decisive course towards democratic reforms and proclaimed favourable conditions for the activities of foreign investors and international agencies' missions' (2003: 11).

However, as Anderson and Steinmann conclude, not only was the democratic promise of this 'Switzerland of the East' tainted with electoral fraud and a lack of freedom of the press, coupled with endemic corruption, the country also experienced widespread poverty. Today, alongside Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is the poorest post-Soviet Central Asian country due not only to its small extent of arable land and scarce natural resources, but also to the new inequalities the market era has brought with it. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most politically unstable countries in the region, with two 'colour' revolutions taking place in 2005 and 2010, resulting in the ousting of the first and second presidents, Akayev and Bakiyev, respectively. The transition process has also been tarnished by bloody ethnic conflicts between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country, the most significant of which took place in 1990 and 2010.

Against the backdrop of the information provided above, it becomes clear that Kyrgyzstan, which would serve, had it been successful, as an apt showcase for the transition through the transfer of Western institutions and mechanisms, has not lived up to the expectations, while suffering from hasty transition policies. Kyrgyzstan's experience with this transition also confirms the literature on post-Soviet transitions more generally, stating that 'this process is therefore not a unilinear one of moving from one stage to the next, as projected in neoliberal plans, but a combined and uneven one having multiple trajectories' (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 14). Following Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery's suggestion, I prefer the term 'transformation', 'which has fewer teleological resonances than transition' (1999: 14-15).

In assessing the revived interest in extant cultural resources in the post-Soviet era, I consider that oral poetry performances inspire cohesion and trust and foster a sense of moral community, more so than the Western models of civil society-building or the exclusive ethno-nationalist

movements that have busied post-Soviet agendas so far.<sup>22</sup> These performances generate ‘a pattern of sociality’ and have the potential to promote ‘a collective idiom of tolerance and civility which it extends to the entire population’ (Hann 2006: 176). Thus, a study of oral poetry performances is an investigation into beliefs, values and everyday practices, and it calls for a shift in attention away from the formal structures and organizations that predominate in the transition literature. Such performances promote alternative forms of social relationship that are more conducive to social cohesion and order than dominant Western models of civil society. I argue that oral poetry performances improvise alternatives that are more relevant to the ethnographic realities of the Kyrgyz and that these improvisations are a response to the rigidity of preconceived models of ‘transition’.

Eschewing the Eurocentric implications of modernization theory for social progress, with Douglas Rogers I view modernity ‘as a diverse array of often competing projects aimed at recasting persons and relations among them’ (Rogers 2004: 34). The historical periods I explore in this work, namely the socialist and post-Soviet eras, were marked by attempts to make the Kyrgyz more modern. Socialist modernity’s attempts to cultivate a new Soviet person ‘free of egotism and selfishness’ and ready to ‘sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the collective’, thus enlightening communities with socialist ideology, ‘sought to fashion a certain type of subject – the New Person whose thinking and actions would be based on an awareness of his or her role in building socialism. Through education, propaganda, and subjectivizing practices, party officials constantly strove to instill this awareness, or consciousness, in Soviet citizens’ (Hoffmann 2003: 45). Post-Soviet visions of modernity, on the other hand, are based on the introduction of Western models of democracy and civil society and notions of ethnic and religious pluralism that use the strict, unidirectional language of ‘transition’. While post-Soviet modernity and globalization have expanded the array of possibilities among the Kyrgyz, they also brought with them new insecurities, coupled with the loss of the integration and community that socialist modernity was able to provide. Any comparative examination of these modernization projects must address the ways in which these projects are refracted through existing social and cultural practices, rather than just exploring what they had in common. Through ethnographic and historical research on oral poetry performances and poets, I explore the

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<sup>22</sup> For broader definitions of civil society with reference to local beliefs and practices which look dissimilar to Western institutional models while having comparable ‘normative appeal’, see Hann and Dunn (1996), Hann (2003).

relationship between these cultural resources and both socialist and post-Soviet projects of modernity.

My discussion of modernity as one of the central themes in this work is relevant to my interest in contributing to the recent literature on modernity in the plural, that is, to ‘multiple’, ‘alternative’ and ‘vernacular’ modernities.<sup>23</sup> The underlying message of these works is that ‘modernity’ should be detached from its association with the West and that classical theories of modernization claiming that Western models of modernity will come to dominate all modern societies across the world should be discarded: ‘One of the most important implications of the term “multiple modernities” is that modernity and Westernization are not identical; Western patterns of modernity are not the only “authentic” modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others’ (Eisenstadt 2000: 2-3). Moreover, a strong theme in this literature is that modernity is not only not necessarily Western, but also that it is not unidirectional: ‘Everywhere, at every national/ cultural site, modernity is not one but many; modernity is not new, but old and familiar; modernity is incomplete and necessarily so’ (Gaonkar 2001: 18). Questioning the homogenizing implications of classic theories of modernity, such as ‘global culture’, Bruce Knaft (2002) emphasizes the need to recognize that people in different places have varying cultural histories. Calling for an understanding of modernity as a ‘differentiated or variegated process’, he highlights the anthropological task of recognizing cultural diversity: ‘anthropologists have questioned the attempt to view modernity as a singular or coherent development. Indeed, the divergent responses of the world’s peoples arguably maintain or increase their cultural diversity at the same time that they become more deeply entwined with capitalist influences, institutions, and impositions’ (2002: 2). In his discussion of the genealogy of Western modernity, Knaft argues that in Europe at the turn of nineteenth century a belief in economic and political progress developed as a result of the growing divergence between expectations and experiences, which increased ‘a sense that passage of time should expectably be marked by progress and improvement vis-à-vis the past’ (2002: 7). This vision of modernity, which juxtaposes progress to the past, meant that history should not be viewed as a source of authenticity or propriety, but rather as an undeveloped past which should be eliminated with progress. A similar approach to modernity that suggests a break with the past could be seen in the official language of the Soviet era. Semantically speaking, in both Russian (*sovremennost*) and Kyrgyz (*zamandashtyk*), modernity is equated

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Eisenstadt (2000), Mitchell (2000), Gaonkar (2001), Knaft (2002).

with contemporaneity: that is, to be modern is to discard old practices and to adapt new ones.

The language of the Eurocentric vision of modernity resonates with the language of transition in the post-Soviet world, both denoting a unidirectional teleology. Accordingly, a plural approach to modernity suggests that the term 'transformation' better captures the complexities of the post-Soviet condition than 'transition'. The Kyrgyz have responded to the post-Soviet transformation in various ways with reference not only to Western influences, but also to history and tradition. While for some *tökmö akynchylyk* is a pre-modern tradition and is not compatible with being modern in the twenty-first century, for others history and tradition are sources of moral authority in the present rather than an undeveloped past, and they are strongly tied to a particular vision of becoming progressive and modern.

## Fieldwork and Methodology

The fieldwork for this book took place between August 2013 and September 2014. I divided my time in the field into three main parts. Initially, I spent three months in Bishkek in order to make the acquaintance of the community of oral poets based in the capital. It was during this time that I met most of the famous oral poets, such as the late Elmirbek Imanaliyev, Jenishbek Jumakadyr, Aaly Tutkuchev and Azamat Bolgonbayev, among others. After initial interviews with them, I began to accompany them to the places of their performance. In addition to numerous hours of recordings of oral poetry competitions both in the capital and in rural Kyrgyzstan, I recorded their performances on quite diverse occasions, such as a man's ninetieth birthday celebration in the nearby city of Tokmok, an event celebrating a baby's first steps held in Issyk-Kul, a feast held to celebrate the purchase of a house in Talas, and the eightieth anniversary of the first issue of the Ministry of Interior's *bulletin* in Bishkek. As I discuss further in the chapters on the contemporary era, the Kyrgyz word *toi* is the name usually used for all these feasts and festivals. These trips allowed me to befriend the poets and afforded me a chance to interview those who hosted these events, as well as the guests. Moreover, by travelling with the poets, who were treated as honourable guests at these events, I was able to record many of their performances, during some of which I was asked to give a toast. This was also when I recorded several national and international oral poetry competitions held in Bishkek, Talas and Almaty, as well as attending a regional festival in Toktogul at which oral poets had been invited to perform.

Meanwhile, I observed training seminars at the oral poetry school, where master oral poets rotated every ten days mentoring fifteen to twenty

student poets. Instead of being actively involved in the training of the student poets, the master poets' tasks were essentially to match the student poets in pairs, umpire their oral poetry duels and assess their performances by giving each one a score out of ten. Observing oral poets in the making was a quite insightful experience: student poets between the ages of ten and twenty tried to improvise their lines in a dialogical form as they responded to their rivals, while at the same time trying to rhyme, and ultimately to compose, meaningful poetry in seven-syllable meters. Master poets were not concerned so much with the length of the syllables as they were with the rhyming and the meaning of each line. While a pair of student poets duelled, seated in chairs in the middle of the room to mimic a stage effect, pairs awaiting their turn usually busied themselves by reciting 'traditional' and 'heavy' words (*salttuu* and *salmaktuu*), as well as repeating to themselves the verbs and nouns that best rhymed. As some of the students at the poetry school playfully described to me, the process resembled a novice learning how to drive a car, like a student driver nervously trying to follow a set of rules, gripping the steering wheel tightly, keeping his eyes fixed on the road, stealing glances in the mirror, while changing gears and deciding which pedals to press with his feet. So too, many of these young oral poets were sweating as they clutched their instrument tightly. They would either sing lengthy lines that did not sound like poetry any more, miss a rhymed ending, upon which the student poets watching would offer their alternatives, or their instrument would lose its harmony with the poetry. On the other hand, the master poets are like professional drivers, free from anxiety as they drive, their repertoires filled with traditional vocabulary and rhyming words, as well as harmonic melodies so that their improvisations have become almost automated in that they sometimes sing as fast as five to six times the regular pace of speech.

The second phase of the fieldwork, which lasted approximately four months, was reserved for archival work in three central state archives, two newspaper archives and the manuscript archive at the National Academy of Sciences, where I gathered the data for the first three historical chapters of the book. My aim was not to research a particular period of time in history because that would have required a longer period of time to peruse all the relevant available documents. Rather, due to the limited period of time reserved for archival work, I chose to track the theme of oral poetry through archival documents dating from the early 1900s, supplemented with oral historical accounts of the pre-revolutionary era collected and archived in the early Soviet era. Thus, although the archival data on oral poets, their performances and the history of the tradition in the pre-revolutionary and

Soviet eras is exhaustive, the historical chapters do not attempt to provide a well-rounded cultural history of the Kyrgyz people.

Pre-revolutionary oral poetry performances were accessed through different sources: the holdings of the manuscript archive, scholarly works published both during and after the Soviet era, and oral historical accounts. The recordings of Soviet-era performances, some of which were kept in the video archive of the KTRK, the national state broadcasting channel, were inaccessible due to a lack of systematic cataloguing, although I was able to access the audio files of several performances from the KTRK's institutional archive of Kyrgyz oral traditions. Some of the texts from Soviet-era poetry performances, data on oral poets, oral poetry ensembles, their concert plans and their business trips to the regions were gathered from the archival collections for the State Philharmonics kept in the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic. The remaining texts were collected from books and newspapers published during the Soviet era. Many party decrees and resolutions from the Central State Archive of Political Documentation of the Kyrgyz Republic were juxtaposed with findings from other archives and other published sources. Supplemented by readings in Soviet history by both local and Western scholars, these archival findings aim to put into perspective the broader politics of the cultural management that was administered by the Soviet state. More specifically, archival data allows a reconsideration of politics *of* culture and politics *through* culture from the peripheries of the Soviet state.

Following the archival research, I spent three months in the 'village of the poets', Aral village located in the Manas region of Talas province. Many of the oral poets whose lives and works are discussed in this book were born and raised in this village, a fact which its residents explain with reference to heavenly blessings. Some of my observations in Aral are discussed in Chapter 5. In addition to supplying me with oral history accounts of the oral poets from the village, the ethnography of the village also complemented my archival work. In particular, the villagers recounted many examples of the onstage and offstage performances I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 and described the cultural life of collective and state farms, as well as the ways in which the local house of culture was used, all serving as a local testimony to the broader party politics of rural Kyrgyzstan. I should also mention that equally important were six-hour long trips that I regularly took to reach the village from Bishkek, which provided me with ample time to have informal conversations with the drivers and fellow passengers about Kyrgyz traditional culture.

I spent the final three months of my fieldwork in the capital, where I interviewed scholars of Kyrgyz folklore, as well as some officials from the

Ministry of Culture, sponsors of the oral poetry schools and the younger generation of student poets, among others. Moreover, it was during this period that I held extended, in-depth interviews with some of the master oral poets. By the time the fieldwork came to an end, I had recorded close to two hundred hours of oral poetry performances in diverse settings. My positionality as a fieldworker with a camera in my hand was not perceived as anything unusual by the oral poets themselves, which could not be said of the audiences at the oral poetry competitions discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Although the Kyrgyz are quite proud of improvised oral poetry performances as an outstanding cultural heritage of their nation, I was nevertheless repeatedly asked why I was not more interested in the Manas epic trilogy, as the epic tradition was considered more suitable for display than improvised oral poetry performances.

The textual analyses of the contemporary oral poetry performances I recorded proved to be relatively less problematic, since I was always part of the context. During the performances, I not only had a chance to observe the reactions of members of the audience, I also held follow-up interviews later on. I was also able to talk to the oral poets themselves following their performances to inquire about their reasons for making specific lyrical or thematic choices. While a similar methodology could not be applied to the Soviet and pre-Soviet era performances, it was possible to crosscheck data from various archives and enrich the analyses with the help of alternative, unofficial historical accounts supplemented by autobiographical writings.

## Outline of the Chapters

The historical ethnography of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances explored in this work takes the mid-nineteenth century as its starting point. This is partly because Kyrgyz scholars of folklore refer to the second half of the nineteenth century as the ‘the era of the classics’ (*klassikalyk door*) of improvised Kyrgyz oral poetry, as many of the master oral poets lived in that era. Moreover, this is also the period when major conflicts took place among the Kyrgyz tribes in the north, when regional khanates collapsed in the south and when Russian imperial presence in Central Asia was secured. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of this chaotic political scene with regard to the role and place of oral poets in the political language of their times. By contextualizing the performances of the master oral poets of the pre-revolutionary era, I suggest that these poets not only worked as advisers and mentors to the political elite, but that their performances were also representative of the moral landscape of their communities. The second half of the chapter is devoted to Toktogul Satylganov, a master Kyrgyz oral poet who was allegedly involved in a local uprising and therefore punished by the



Russian imperial military tribunal based on the reports of the regional Kyrgyz elite. The chapter ends with documenting how, though only posthumously, Toktogul was celebrated as the greatest Kyrgyz oral poet in history and named *akyn-demokrat*, a democratic poet, by the Soviet state for his struggles against the feudal and imperial administrations, his performances being championed as a local testimony of the social support behind the Bolshevik Revolution.

Following the *akyn-demokrat* tradition of Toktogul, Kyrgyz oral poetry performances were institutionalized and remade into an invented Soviet tradition. Major oral poets from the regions were gathered into ensembles under the State Philharmonics and sent across the country to perform for up to ten months of the year. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the ways in which the extant traditional culture of the Kyrgyz was made part of the broader socialist modernization project. Party officials' acknowledgement of the traditional authority of oral poets among the Kyrgyz also coincided with the prescribed role of folklore as forming the basis of a new proletarian culture. Thus, Kyrgyz oral poets, now forbidden to improvise, were transformed into the most prominent 'cultural workers' in the country. They not only served as the 'local allies' of the revolution, their performances also translated the alien language of state socialism into the vernacular. Chapter 3 describes this process. According to alternative historical accounts, however, oral poets continued to sing outside their preapproved repertoires at informal gatherings following their socialist stage performances. In Chapter 4, I discuss how oral poets not only 'sang socialism', but, off the socialist stage, continued to sing the traditional legends, myths and epics, thus resuming their pre-revolutionary role as the 'voice of the ancestors'. Alternative historical sources thus offer a broader picture, one that contradicts the ambitious discourse of the 'collectivization of the arts' in the official language of the Communist Party. In this chapter, I suggest that 'offstage' oral poetry performances, which took place as often as socialist poetry performances, promoted a sense of cultural continuity with the pre-revolutionary past, resulting in a 'state-sponsored traditionalism', however unintended on the part of the party.

The remaining three chapters document the revival of oral poetry performances in the era of independence. Chapter 5 offers a thorough analysis of a performance to demonstrate the dynamic interaction between oral poetry performances and politics, contrasting it with the regional literature on the exercise of power by post-Soviet states over their citizens through cultural production and the political elite's sponsorship of their nations' cultural heritage. Moreover, it summarizes the strategies that oral poets, as the voices of the ancestors, have followed in claiming to be the

authentic representatives of the nation by locating themselves between ‘the people’ and ‘the politicians’. Finally, it attempts to complicate the discourse of ‘retraditionalization’ in the former Soviet Central Asia by juxtaposing the two central characteristics of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances – improvisation and tradition – as well as reflecting on how an improvised piece of poetry can be labelled traditional and revered when poets are singing about the ‘perils of postsocialism’.

Chapter 6 elaborates on three oral poetry competitions, situating them in broader discussions of national identity in Kyrgyzstan following the collapse of state socialism. It puts forward the concept of ‘frustrated nationalism’ to describe the termination of the systematic state promotion of ethno-national identities that had been created, maintained and heavily sponsored during the Soviet era. Moreover, it describes how oral poets contributed to wooden talk of nationalism, referring to a glorious past and promising future while at the same time singing about sentiments of ‘frustrated nationalism’ referencing the present condition of Kyrgyz national identity.

Chapter 7 explores the social life of oral poets beyond the stage, taking the example of today’s most famous Kyrgyz oral poet. Having discussed the court poets of the pre-revolutionary era and the party poets of the Soviet era in the earlier chapters, I document the post-Soviet experience of oral poets through a discussion of the marketization of heritage. Elaborating on the political economy of oral poetry performances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, I discuss how cultural workers have become poets for hire.



## ***Chapter 2***

### **The Interface between the Oral and the Soviet**

The period between the 1850s and the 1920s was one of the most eventful in the history of the pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz. The wave of socio-economic and political transformation experienced by their local populations was initiated by the expansion of Imperial Russia into the heart of Central Asia, only to gain momentum with the beginning of Soviet rule in the region. These transformations resulted in the fall of regional khanates, alliances between the northern Kyrgyz tribal elites and the Tsarist administration, the commencement of colonial projects with their economic and civilizing missions, and lastly the violent revolts against Russian imperial rule and indigenous modernist-nationalist movements, all of which have been popular research topics in the literature on the lives of Central Asian peoples in the pre-revolutionary era (Schuyler 1876; Skrine, Ross, and Vereshchagin 1899; Zenkovsky 1955; Pierce 1960; Becker 1968; Manz 1987; Khalid 1998; Sabol 1998, 2003; Peterson 2011).

Another area of research on this period is the exploration of the genre of heroic epic poetry which, as I discuss in the next section, has received a substantial amount of attention from scholars and travellers in the region since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The same, however, cannot be claimed for the improvised oral poetry of the Kyrgyz, or *tökmö akynchylık*, which, despite its popularity with local populations, has not yet been studied systematically outside Kyrgyzstan. My interest in the pre-Soviet history of these performances is sustained not only by their centrality to the social life of the pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz before the Soviet era. Furthermore, exploring this early period will help contextualize the ways in which these poets and their works inspired Soviet-era party officials to embrace the institution of oral poetry and sponsor it for the Soviet state's own ideological ends. Finally, this era is significant for the anthropological implications of a

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<sup>24</sup> One of the earliest references to Manas as a historical figure occurs in Sayf ad-Din Akhshikandi's *Majmu at-Tavarikh*, a sixteenth-century chronicle of Central Asia. See Hatto (1980), Prior (2002) or Heide (2008) for discussions of the reliability of this source.

revival of interest in the celebrations of the oral poets of the nineteenth century following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, it is important to note that primary sources for the pre-revolutionary era are scarce and limited, including the oral historical accounts found in the Manuscript Archive of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, as they were collected in the early Soviet era. In this chapter, therefore, *I explore the constructed historical accounts written down in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras of the oral poets and their performances in the pre-revolutionary era.*

The use of the word ‘interface’ in the title of this chapter provides a historical reference to the period between the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, a period I consider to be the dawn of an era of radical transformation in the lives of the pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz.<sup>25</sup> In addition, ‘interface’ also refers to the move from orality to literacy, signposting the decades of accelerated modernization to come, which, among other things, entailed moving the Kyrgyz from being a predominantly oral culture to a literate one. Before discussing Kyrgyz oral poetry performances in the pre-revolutionary era and showing how Kyrgyz oral poetry performances came to be part of the socialist modernization project, however, it will be useful to provide some introductory information detailing the history and characteristics of Kyrgyz oral traditions.

## **Kyrgyz Oral Traditions: Epics, Oral Poetry and Poetry Duels**

### ***Oral Poetry and the Epic Tradition***

One of the fundamental reasons the Kyrgyz developed such a profound genre of oral poetic art can be attributed to their pastoral nomadic lifestyles, which prevented the establishment of educational institutions and widespread literacy among the wider Kyrgyz society, unlike their sedentary neighbours in the region. Although historical sources differ, it is generally accepted that the literacy rate among the Kyrgyz was quite low until the socialist state launched its war on illiteracy as early as the first decade of its rule.<sup>26</sup> Ploskikh claims the overall literacy rate before the revolution was 3.1 percent (Ploskikh 2002: 44; cited in Prior 2006).<sup>27</sup> Daniel Prior argues that,

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<sup>25</sup> Kyrgyz scholars of oral traditions refer to the same era as the ‘epoch of the classics’ or the *klassikalyk door*; see Obozkanov 2006: 8. Prior (2002) calls the period between 1863 and 1922 ‘the twilight age’ of the Kyrgyz epic tradition.

<sup>26</sup> ‘At the Pishpek district party conference in October 1921, delegates passed a resolution identifying the organization’s principal goals as the implementation of NEP, the completion of the Land and Water Reform, and the liquidation of illiteracy’ (Loring 2008: 62).

<sup>27</sup> In just a decade, literacy went up especially among the children according to 1926 census that sets literacy rate among the Kyrgyz over the age of 14 as 11.5 percent for men and 0.3

unlike the Kazakhs, whose literacy rates reached as high as 42 percent in certain districts, Russian-educated native elites were mostly absent among the pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz. Owing to the efforts of the native reformers<sup>28</sup>, a number of schools had been founded at the turn of the twentieth century, and 'Russian-native and Tatar new-method schools were opened across Kyrgyzstan [i.e. within present-day Kyrgyz borders]. By 1914 there were 107 schools, including 103 primary schools, with 7,041 students, only 547 of whom were Kyrgyz children of the local elite' (Tabyshalieva 2005: 268). Moreover, the Kyrgyz had no newspaper in their native language until after the October Revolution of 1917 (Baktygulov and Mombekova 1999; Ploskikh 2002).<sup>29</sup>

It is evident that the Kyrgyz were by no means a purely oral culture in the pre-revolutionary era; even prior to the opening of *Jadidi* schools, there was still 'limited literacy' due to the circulation of the 'written word' from neighbouring sedentary communities with writing as well as Islam and its scripture being influential here. Nevertheless, orality was predominantly a means not only of communication, but also of cultural transmission, the education of younger generations, the preservation of local historical knowledge and entertainment among the pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz of the pre-revolutionary era (cf. Bellér-Hann 2000).

Oral epic traditions of Central Asia and Siberia in general and those of the Kyrgyz in particular have long attracted the attention of Western travellers and scholars. For example, Levshin (1840), Atkinson (1858), Vambery (1864, 1868), Valikhanov (1865), Radloff (1868, 1884), Castagne (1930), Chadwick and Chadwick (1940), Bartold (1963), Chadwick and Zhirmunsky (1969), all explore the Central Asian epic genre, at least in part. Some of

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percent for women (Loring 2008: 66). The percentage increases as the age being considered declines: 22.1 percent of males and 7.4 percent of females above the age of nine were literate according to the 1926 census; the numbers increase to 76.7 for men and 63 for women in the 1939 census (Lorimer 1946: 199).

<sup>28</sup> For discussions of the Jadidi movement, see Lazzerini (1992) and Khalid (1998). Baldauf calls the representatives of *usul-i jadida* a 'loosely connected group of individuals' (2001: 72), and locates Central Asian Jadidism within the broader framework of modernism in the Muslim world.

<sup>29</sup> Prior argues that there was a great contrast compared to the Kazakh, who had experienced 'wide-ranging activities including education, literature, ethnography, politics, and publishing' in the pre-revolutionary era (Prior 2006: 72). Differences between the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz are more obvious in Sabol (1998): 'Creating a standardized Kazak written language and orthography and establishing a written literary heritage especially of poetry became the primary method for disseminating their understanding of Kazak national distinctiveness. The resulting discourse on literature, education, and politics shaped the dominant socio-political opinions espoused by Kazakh intellectuals on the nature of the Kazak nation before 1920' (1998: iv).

these works agree that the genre of the epic narrative of Central Asian and Siberian peoples is most likely of common origin, and that neighbouring communities, such as the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz, share certain heroes in their significant heroic narratives (Chadwick and Chadwick 1940: 7, 27; see also Paksoy 1989). According to the Chadwicks' extensive survey, 'Heroic narrative poetry is found in its most highly developed form among the Kara-Kirghiz of the Tien Shan Mountains, especially in the neighborhood of Lake Issyk-Kul' (1940: 25).<sup>30</sup> These accounts show that the Kyrgyz revered music and poetry as their highest pleasure:

These people esteem music and poetry as their highest pleasure. After a fortunate adventure the marauder, however tired and hungry he may be, will listen in the open street with real delight to the *bakhshi* (troubadour)<sup>31</sup>, who comes to meet him. Returning home from a foray, or other heroic deed, the young warriors are in the habit of amusing themselves throughout the night with poetry and music. In the desert, where man is either ignorant of the luxuries of life, or does without them, it is, nevertheless, that the *bakhshi* is very seldom wanting, and besides, that the latter are found in great numbers, going about to exercise their art. The nomads have the habit of amusing themselves with poetic games (Vambéry 1868: 342).

Wilhelm Radloff's accounts of the importance of improvised oral poetry also confirm that poetry and poets were both intimate and integral elements of Kyrgyz social life in the mid-nineteenth century:

It is said that the art of poetry is prized by the Kara-Kirghiz more than by any other peoples of Central Asia ... Improvisation is widely practiced, and practically everyone is ready to perform to a small circle of listeners, though only specialists and professionals are willing to perform to a large audience (Radloff; cited in Chadwick and Chadwick 1940: 178).

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<sup>30</sup> Until the mid-1920s the Kyrgyz were called Kara-Kyrgyz, while the Kazakhs were called either Kyrgyz or Kaisak-Kyrgyz by the Russians. In the pre-revolutionary era, Russians used 'Kyrgyz' as a generic term to designate Turkic nomads (Brower 1996). Also, 'Before the Soviet period, the nomadic Turkic groups known today as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were usually referred to by the single term "kirgiz." Russians occasionally referred to Kyrgyz as the "kara-kirgiz" (black kirgiz) or "dikokamennye Kirgiz" (wild stone kirgiz) to distinguish them from the Kazakhs' (Peterson 2011: 131).

<sup>31</sup> 'Shaman of the Western Turks', in (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969: 161). Also, 'They [*bakshas*] are sometimes regarded as the representatives of the ancient shamans, who have disappeared in the west since the introduction of Mohammedanism; but Vambéry and others use the term of any minstrel, especially those in the former Khanate of Khiva' (Chadwick and Chadwick 1940: 175).

*Dastanchy* or *jomokchu* (singers of epics) and *yrchy* (oral poets) were the two main actors who preserved, composed, transmitted and performed a vast body of local oral traditions. The use of the term *yrchy*, literally ‘singer’, with reference to oral poets was gradually abandoned as the category of singer expanded to include singers of non-traditional songs during the Soviet era. According to Soviet-era Russian-language sources, Kyrgyz oral poets were called *pevets-improvisator*, while *tökmö akyn* was adopted in Kyrgyz, a set phrase that clearly distinguishes oral poets from different types of singers and written poets, those who produce written poetry. Similarly, the Russian musicologist Vinogradov suggested that the word *akyn* has been introduced to the Kyrgyz language relatively recently, *yrchy* having been in use previously (1961: 6). In Kyrgyzstan today, *yrchy* is only used when referring to singers of popular songs in the Western style, as in *estrada yrchysy*, and it is considered a highly derogatory label for the oral poets. Just as the terminology referring to Kyrgyz oral poets changed over time, so did oral poets’ perceptions of themselves and their art, as well as the Kyrgyz people’s reception of performances of oral poetry.

Among the contemporary Kyrgyz, an oral poet is called *tökmö akyn*. In the Kyrgyz language, *töküü*, the verbal form of *tökmö*, literally means ‘to pour’ and/ or ‘to flow’, therefore a *tökmö akyn* is an oral poet who improvises.<sup>32</sup> *Tökmö akynchylık* designates the highest ranking oral tradition among the Kyrgyz. A *tökmö akyn* is not just an oral poet; more explicitly, he is a skilful story teller, a melodist, a local historian and, as many poets were, an epic singer. In addition, he is capable of improvising poetry on the spur of the moment and can stand up to a rival oral poet in poetry duels, called *aitysh*. A critical assessment of the historical development of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances suggests that they do not correspond to any of the classical categories of folk art, music, songs or tales, since the poets do not have a set repertoire, a canonized text or a plot for their performances.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, oral poets and their performances had become integral elements in the social life of pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz, from celebrating life-cycle rituals and providing sources of entertainment to mediating conflicts at a local or regional level. Oral poets’ use of poetic language and oratory, their skills in improvisation and their prowess as masters of the rich and revered body of Kyrgyz oral traditions set them apart from the ordinary people, earning them the status of traditional intellectuals in their local communities. Many oral poets were sent as messengers to rival tribes at times of conflict or as emissaries to a regional festival to sing and recite blessings on behalf of their region. Among the

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<sup>32</sup> While *akyn* alone means a poet, *jazgych akyn* (literally, ‘written poet’) refers to poets who produce written poetry.



Kyrgyz, a *tökmö akyn* was not only 'a popular bard, who sings and improvises', but also 'a respected member of the community to whom people traditionally turn for political advice, foretelling [*sic*, as a fortune teller], or entertainment. In traditional Kyrgyz society *akyns* exercised significant influence over the people and tribal leaders' (Abazov 2004: 68). In the words of Abdysalam Obozkanov,

Oral poetry is an improvised, very intricate folk art that encompasses the fields of philosophy, counselling [and] oratory, [turning an oral poet into] a critic, comedian, historian, ethnographer, artist, master of ceremonies, etc. That is why poets were among the advisers and orators of the Khans, who would turn to them for their advice. They were further intermediaries and ambassadors between peoples and clans who were divided and fighting (Obozkanov 2006: 17).

Historically, singers of epics specialized in the recitation of epic poetry, a rather elaborate genre of poetry in Kyrgyz oral traditions. Typically, epic singers sung their lines using different intonations, increasing or slowing down the pace of their speech as their plots progressed. They would synchronize the lyrics with their body language in order to enrich their poetry, occasionally keeping their eyes closed and suggesting a trance-like performance, which was not accompanied by the playing of any musical instrument. Verbatim memorization was nearly impossible due to the lengths of many epics, in particular the *Manas* trilogy, as well as the lack of written copies of them; therefore, singers created a space that allowed them to improvise their lines.<sup>33</sup> However, improvisation had its limits, since the singers had to adhere to a general plot line, which had multiple versions that had been performed, canonized and popularized by different singers.<sup>34</sup> Radloff defines the type of improvisation at work in the singing of epic poetry as follow:<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Prior rightly suggests that, in addition to a level of deviation in each performance of epic poetry, it was also the case that certain epics were more popular, while others would be silenced depending on the social and political context of the times: 'while the mid-nineteenth century Kirghiz epic tradition centered around the paramount hero *Manas*, obviously *Manas*' predominance reflected wishful thinking on the part of the hard-pressed Kirghiz tribes of the day' (2002: 42). See also Goody and Watt (2005) on the homeostatic nature of oral traditions in non-literate societies.

<sup>34</sup> The major difference between the epic songs and improvised poetry is that epics are examples of oral traditions with fixed forms, learnt by heart and transmitted as they stand. Improvised poetry, by contrast, is a free text without a fixed form, it being not the poetry but its practice that is learned. For a further discussion of such types, see Vansina (1965: 22-23).

<sup>35</sup> However, *tökmö akyns*, broadly speaking, are masters of the oral traditions and of the improvisational use of language. Moreover, many oral poets used to sing and even compose epics themselves: Kalyk Akiyev (1883-1953), Osmonkul Bölöbalayev (1888-1967) and more

Every minstrel who has any skill at all always improvises his songs according to the inspiration of the moment, so that he is not in a position to recite a song twice in exactly the same form; but one must not suppose that this process of improvisation involves composing a new poem every time. The procedure of the improvising minstrel is exactly like that of the pianist. As the latter puts together into a harmonious form different runs which are known to him, transitions and motifs according to the inspiration of the movement, and thus, makes up the new from the old which is familiar to him, so also does the minstrel of epic poems (Radloff; cited in Chadwick and Chadwick 1940: 181-182).

Western and local scholars were not only drawn towards Kyrgyz epic poetry and singers in the pre-revolutionary era. The study of Kyrgyz epic poetry, primarily of the *Manas* epic, which was written down as a whole for the first time in 1922, continued during the Soviet era and witnessed an unprecedented increase in the post-Soviet era, mostly for ideological reasons in both cases.<sup>36</sup> However, among the ordinary Kyrgyz, *tökmö akynchlyk*, especially the *aitysh*, has been more popular than the epics for two basic reasons. First, the language employed by Kyrgyz oral poets was quite simplified and could easily be understood by all members of society regardless of age, which contrasts drastically with the archaic and glossy language that is representative of the canonized epics. Secondly, the themes of oral poetry performances, whether solo or in the form of poetry duels, have remained contemporary, as they deal with everyday life, for example, catastrophic events like famine, the spread of a new disease or the experience of hardship because of the imposition of new taxes, all of which are pressing concerns for society at the time of the performance. Alternatively, performances have been held on occasions such as life-cycle rituals, regional festivals, etc. which are a source of happiness for the community. In comparison, the plots of the epics depict historical events,

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recently Tuganbai Abdiyev (1937-2008) were master *tökmö akyns* who also performed epic poetry.

<sup>36</sup> Among the most notable works are Hatto (1990), Akmatalliev, Sarypbekov, and Mukasov (1994), Asankanov and Omurbekov (1995), Karypkulov and Sarypbekov (1995), Koichuev (1995), Prior (1995) and Isakov (1997). It is clear that the efforts of the first post-Soviet President Akayev were decisive in supporting this publishing trend in the mid-1990s. As mentioned earlier, 1995 was celebrated as the Year of *Manas*, as shown by the dates of the publications cited above.

many of which usually have no relevance to the circumstances of current social life, except for their ideological use by political authorities.<sup>37</sup>

One critical component of oral traditions among the Kyrgyz that sets oral poets apart from epic singers is their didactic genres. Those of *terme* and *nasyiat* are defined as follows:

*Terme* poetry demonstrates the philosophy, wisdom, and oratorical skills of our people. *Nasyiat* poetry has a broader thematic scope. Such works describe the good and evil imagination embedded in people's characters, teaches them the rules of good manners, and calls for adherence to modesty, truthfulness, diligence, humility and humaneness (Asanov 2004: 9; see also Reichl 2000: 41).

However, in most accounts, the definitions of *terme*, *nasyiat* and also *ülgü* (exemplary) poetry blend into one: that is, into a didactic genre that teaches moral messages. These moral messages may have multiple functions, from passing down a piece of traditional wisdom to the younger generation to acclaiming accepted codes of moral behaviour in a given society.

Many of the moral messages embedded in lines of poetry have turned into aphorisms among the Kyrgyz today, as in the first line of the poetry below (Kaiypov 1981: 145):

Chew the stone when you have teeth,  
Once you have might for everything,  
Or, there is no free food, free meal,  
Laziness tortures the heart,  
If you work, that is a great gain. (p. 237)

Especially in these didactic genres, oral poets usually use kinship terms in their poetry, thereby representing themselves as father figures to their audiences, as in the following case (Kebekova et al. 1998: 23):

My son, there is no swan if there is no lake,  
And no screams if no conflict,  
No flag has a defeated khan,  
No water on a snowless hill,  
No poison in the words of  
A fellow humble and kind,  
Keep these words in mind,  
Later, you may need them. (p. 237)

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, regardless of how much the Kyrgyz are proud of having the longest epic poem in the world, the *Manas* epic, I never met a young Kyrgyz man below the age of thirty who could understand even a third of the recitations from the epic I observed during my fieldwork.

The lines above are a prime example of the didactic poetry of the pre-revolutionary era, in which the final message is only revealed after the recitation of a long list of objective observations about nature that set the tone of the poetry.<sup>38</sup> Almost every oral poet, past and present, traditionally sings his *terme*, *nasyiat* and *ülgü* poetry at a certain point in his life, as it signifies the level of wisdom he has attained.

### ***Aitysh as a Cultural Performance and the Politics of Legitimacy***

An *aitysh* is a competitive performance where two oral poets duel with words. *Aituu* is the root word which means ‘to say, to tell’, whereas *aityshuu* has a negative meaning, very similar to ‘talk back’ or ‘answer back’. Here it refers to a debated dialogue between two people, but one which is not a proper conversation in itself.<sup>39</sup> As a stage performance, *aitysh* is a poetry duel performed by two oral poets on stage. The image of two men pitted against each other on a stage, dressed in traditional Kyrgyz robes and felt hats and taking turns to sing improvised poetry to an enthusiastic audience, is an essential part of most rural and urban public festivals among the Kyrgyz. During such events, poets attempt to outwit each other by improvising poetry, the themes of which are more or less flexible depending on the occasion and the interests of each poet. As the competition is set in a dialogical format, whichever theme one poet starts with should be continued by his competitor when it is his turn to respond. Poets usually take a break from improvising around the middle of their performance and continue their duelling with a moral or witty anecdote, each trying to harness more audience applause than his opponent.

In contemporary times, these performances are always judged, as in the case of national or international poetry competitions, but in the past the strength of the audience’s applause decided the winner. The winning poet is usually presented with a cash award or some other type of material good. Although monetary awards are always welcome, more important than anything else is the opportunity the poets are given to increase their reputations. The master poets consolidate their prestige, while the younger poets seek to gain public attention as promising future talents.

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<sup>38</sup> Zalkar Akyndar, Kebekova et al. (1998: 23).

<sup>39</sup> The Turkic suffix *-ysh* refers to a collective action, as in *körüşhüü*, derived from *körüü* (to see), and *körüşhöbüz*, ‘We will see each other’. However, derived from *aituu* (to tell, to speak), *aityshuu* connotes antagonism between the speakers. Thus, my analysis is based on *aitysh* meaning a verbal duel, not a conversation.

As for the ritual aspect of these performances, poets usually sing greetings to the audience first, followed by praises for the organizers of the event, God, ancestors and so forth. Everything about the poets, their attire, the eloquence of their voices, their ability to improvise in rhyme, their competence in skilfully playing their instrument in harmony with the content of their poetry, their praises and anecdotes, all of these factors are taken into consideration when they compete against a rival.

The historical development of epic poetry and *tökmö akynchylyk* and their origins is seldom investigated in the vast literature on Kyrgyz oral traditions. In her discussion of the history of Kazakh epic singers (*ziraus*) and oral poets (*aqyns*), Alma Kunanbaeva explores the antiquity of these institutions by asking which is the older practice, epic singing or *aitys*?

Gradually, a structured concept of the genesis and evolution of folklore forms was developed. This concept is based on a continuity of the folklore bearers whose functions are consecutively transformed, as follows: *bakshy* → *zirau* → *zirsi* → *aqyn*. In this succession, the main role belongs to a general line of evolution from ritual and magic via the primarily nondifferentiated epic-creator, and the impersonal performance of the *zirau* to the individualized personality of the lyrical singer, *aqyn* (Kunanbaeva 1995: 299).

Thus, she suggests that epic singing is the basic and first phase in the development of the institution of *tökmö akynchylyk*.

Kazakh folklorist Edyge Tursunov offers an anthropologically informed explanation for the relationship of causality between the institutions of epic and oral poetry. Some of his most important arguments, which are discussed in Kunanbaeva (1995: 300-301), can be summarized as follows. First, an oral poet among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz can be both male and female, whereas an epic singer is usually male; hence, the institution of oral poetry is more ancient, having possibly appeared before the establishment of a patriarchal society.<sup>40</sup> Second, an oral poet represents a tribe, an epic singer a union of tribes or a khanate, which are formed in a later period of history. Third, an oral poet directs and performs at life-cycle rituals, whereas an epic singer does not. Finally, an oral poet takes part in the oral poetic duel or *aitysh*, which, Tursunov suggests, originates in ancient ritual hostility. Thus, the *aitysh* and oral poetry seem to retain certain archaic features from earlier times:

*Aqyns* take part in *aitys*, which originates from the ancient ritual hostility among the groups whose members were connected to each

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<sup>40</sup> In contrast to their prevalence in Kazakhstan, female oral poets are almost virtually non-existent in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. During my fieldwork I only encountered one female Kyrgyz oral poet, who would only occasionally appear at national poetry contests.

other by exogamy. In its present form, the *aitys* serves to demonstrate the art of *aqyn*, still preserving certain archaic features, such as: eulogizing of the virtues of one's own tribe and belittling those of the other; the absence of competition among members of the same tribe; the vast typology of *aitys* genres which are oriented toward the participation of young people ready for marriage; permissibility of ritual rudeness ... (Kunanbaeva 1995: 301).

In her review of the literature on verbal duels, Valentina Pagliai argues that 'The view of verbal duels as a cathartic expression of violence where the negative impulses of society or its members get released, and conflict gets resolved, developed in an ethnological milieu dominated by functionalistic and structural-functionalistic theories around the middle of the twentieth century' (2009: 61). She further asserts that 'functionalist arguments reduced verbal dueling to fulfilling only one role in society' (2009: 62).

Such works often make reference to Max Gluckman's arguments about social catharsis and venting aggression against power. In line with his theorization of what he called 'rituals of rebellion' (1954), Gluckman interprets Eskimo singing contests as acts of conflict: 'Since the songs allege misdemeanours against Eskimo morality, the contests are in a way ceremonies which, like rituals, assert the code, and a man must sharpen his wit in terms of that code' (Gluckman 2012 [1965]: 306).

I suggest that the ritual aspect of poetry duels can be further explored in the classical anthropological literature on non-industrial societies. Marcel Mauss's interpretations of potlatch and agonistic giving are fitting examples with which to discuss the phenomenon of poetry duels in pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz society, as the institution of patronage has been one of the driving forces for the advancement of Kyrgyz oral traditions. Regional festivals, which were status markers for Kyrgyz tribal leaders in the pre-revolutionary era, exemplified one of the significant occasions on which oral poets from around the region would gather to perform poetry duels in front of large crowds. Tribal leaders from surrounding regions who were invited to the festivals would select their strongest poets to accompany them to the event. Poetry duels between the oral poets of different regions turned these events into agonistic giving, or what Mauss calls 'total services of an agonistic type' (1990: 7).

In his description of non-industrial societies, Mauss expands on the spectrum of economic activities between collectivities by pointing to the wide range of exchange activities, not limited to property and wealth. Thus, he asserts, 'In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on

of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract' (1990: 5). Moreover, classical themes such as competitive exchange or competitive feasting serve as a comparative phenomenon to describe these regional festivals of tribal elites where poetry duels take place. Malinowski (1961) describes the *kula* ring as a ceremonial trade and a formalized system of competitive feasting, '*noblesse oblige*', which he considers to be primitive forms of the 'noble expenditure' that could be witnessed in the recent history of European society.<sup>41</sup>

The way Nora Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky portray *aitysh* as an old customary public performance among the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz points to similar observations among the peoples of Central Asia. They call *aitysh* 'the most salient manifestations of the art of improvisation':

Such competitions took place during public holidays and feast days and were attended by large crowds of people... In the old times, a common subject of such contests was the rivalry between two families or tribes: the singer would sing of the wealth and glory of his own family, and abuse, at the same time, his rival's family, which afforded the opportunity to compose in a satirical vein. The subject of the contest could also be more personal, such as mockery of the rival (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969: 329-330).

My discussion of *aitysh* and oral poetry among the pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz suggests the need not only for a close investigation of how they are performed, but also for an attempt to understand the broader meanings of exchange between the poets and their tribal elites, that is, their patrons. *Aitysh* performances are an occasion for the appearance of ritual hostility and permissible ritual rudeness during regional festivals, which were as prime examples of agonistic giving and competitive feasting among the Kyrgyz tribal elites in the pre-revolutionary era.

In fact, the presence of the institution of court poetry among the Kyrgyz, which is observed in diverse sources, is clearly linked to the ways in which the relationship between the poet and the patron shape such performances. Radloff, one of the earliest scholars to mention relations of patronage between the poets and the tribal elites, observed the role of oral poets at regional festivals: 'the Sultans consider it very necessary for their prestige to have one of these men attached to them, who will honor them by singing on all public occasions' (Radloff 1868: iv; cited in Chadwick and Chadwick 1940: 178).<sup>42</sup>

In her discussion of the different types of oral poet that exist worldwide, Finnegan refers to relations of power in which poets play a role

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<sup>41</sup> See Grant (2009: 51-56); Sahlin (1963).

<sup>42</sup> See also Prior (2000; 2002) for a discussion of patronage in the Kyrgyz epic tradition.

in a given society. She suggests that the publicly recognized role of oral poets as professional singers allows them to uphold the authority of the state or religion, which in return empowers the poet. According to her observations, 'Court poets are common in aristocratic or hierarchical societies, from the poets of mediaeval Wales, Ireland and Scotland to the early Tamil bards or the minstrels of nineteenth century Kirghiz sultans' (Finnegan 1992: 189).<sup>43</sup>

In her response to the harsh criticisms Kazakh folklore scholars have directed at the Soviet politics of folklore, especially with regard to the state's use of folklore for purposes of socialist propaganda, Irina Gutkin suggests that closer attention should be paid to the historical and culturally specific circumstances in which local political cultures and Soviet politics interacted. She asks, 'Could it be that so many singers from Central Asian nations readily placed their talents in the service of Soviet power because in their native traditions they were "court singers", i.e., in the (ideological) service of the feudal power lords, and thus traditionally associated themselves with the powers that be?' (Gutkin 1997: 39).

Daniel Prior is yet another scholar who has paid attention to the role of patronage in the development of oral traditions among the Kyrgyz. In his *Patron, Party, Patrimony* (2000), he explores the cultural history of the Kyrgyz epic tradition from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. In his discussion, he situates the institution of patronage as one side of the triangular social situation that provided the existence and maintenance of 'a healthy oral heroic epic tradition' (2000: 1). He suggests that a significant transformation in the patronage of epic poetry took place with the change in the political climate:

Before the Revolution, there had been a welter of chieftains and other audiences, evidently with competing political genealogical and religious interests to be embroidered in epic song by knowing bards. Bard-patron alliances formed and dissolved constantly. Under Soviet rule, the field of patrons was pared down to the monolithic state. This state was vastly more potent politically than the traditional kind of patron. Bards could no longer go to someone else if they wore out their welcome or felt they could get better treatment elsewhere. There was nowhere else to turn; yet the all surrounding

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<sup>43</sup> Finnegan, who objects to the findings of Dillon (1947) and Williams (1971), suggests that the institution of court poetry is not peculiar to 'Indo-European Society' (Finnegan 1992: 189n).



state-patron was also more politically remote and abstract than the old leaders of camps and tribes (2000: 35).<sup>44</sup>

The pre-revolutionary-era patron–poet relationship in Kyrgyz oral traditions also appears quite strongly in the Soviet-era oral poets’ denunciations of their pre-Soviet practices as court poets. In every single poet’s autobiographical file in the archives, I discovered that they had all denounced their own lives and works in the feudal era. Of these biographies, those of Alymkul and Sharshen are quite elaborate on this point:<sup>45</sup>

*Alymkul Üsönbayev:*

At present [1939] I am 45 years old. I was orphaned at the age of 12, and had no chance but was in the service of the *bais*.<sup>46</sup> My earliest songs were woeful, on the hardships the people endured. I used to sing about the cruelty of the *manaps* and the Tsar.<sup>47</sup> I was known as a renowned poet at the age of 25. It will not be wrong to say my future changed after I met Toktogul when he came to our village. One day I went to the funeral of a *manap*. The other *manaps* thought I sang praises to the deceased *manap*, but I actually sang about all the misdeeds of that *manap*. Of course, this event did not end peacefully; they took from me my only horse [as a punishment].<sup>48</sup>

*Sharshen Termechikov:*

When my father died in 1916, *bais* sold away my mother for a brideprice.<sup>49</sup> I started singing as a child; since I never sang praises to

<sup>44</sup> Prior’s comments point to a very significant contrast between the historical development of the institutions of epic poetry and *tökmö akynchylık* in the Soviet era. While, as Prior asserts, the state-patron was politically ‘remote and abstract’ for the epic poets, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, *tökmö akyns* were socialist ‘cultural workers’, their art being situated at the very centre of the socialist modernization project among the rural Kyrgyz.

<sup>45</sup> The language used in the personal files of some other poets is almost identical. See the following: Toktonaaly Shabdanbaev: ‘Born into a poor family in Kant region in 1896. Orphaned at an early age, he survived by working in the service of the *bais*’ (TsGAKR f. 1558, op. 1); Musa Baetov: ‘Born into a poor family in Akatalaa region in 1902. Orphaned at an early age, he had no other chance but to work for the *bais*’ (TsGAKR f. 2753, op. 1).

<sup>46</sup> *Bai* literally means ‘rich’ and refers to the elite members of a Kyrgyz clan.

<sup>47</sup> Prior calls *manap* ‘a leader of extraordinary power and influence at the top level of the northern Kyrgyz elite’ (Prior 2013: 137). This term began to be used in the second half of the nineteenth century (Karataev and Eraliev 2005: 221). For Prior (2013), there must be a connection between the emergence of the term and Russian colonial expansion in Central Asia since this title was not used among the Kyrgyz tribal elite, who were previously called *biy*: ‘the title came to be used specifically to address certain circumstances in which the *biys* found themselves in the new colonial space’ (Prior 2013: 172).

<sup>48</sup> TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 41, p. 48.

<sup>49</sup> Under their exogamous marriage practices, Kyrgyz used to marry a person from a distant clan or another tribe; a brideprice, called *kalyn* in Kyrgyz, would be paid to the family of the

the *bais* they would beat me constantly. The path for the development of my professional career opened only after the revolution. I started to sing about the vileness of the old times and *bais* and *manaps* while singing praise to the new era ... in the old times, injustice and sorrowful life was our fate ...<sup>50</sup>

During an era when the moral authority of the present demanded that the near past be denounced, the tribal elites' patronage of the poets served enormously to give the Soviet reconstruction of the pre-revolutionary past the image of a period in which the masses suffered from injustices by the hands of their feudal oppressors.

## Pre-revolutionary Era

### *Historical Context*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Central Asia was home to power struggles at the local and regional levels, which would change the face of the region for decades to come. On the one hand, the incursions by the Kalmyk had ceased by the early 1800s, while the Kokand khanate in the south expanded its territories by annexing much of Central Asia between the 1810s and 1820s.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Imperial Russia's expansion into Central Asia was a steady process that started with initial interactions between the tsarist government and Kazakh khans.<sup>52</sup> However, it was not until the 1850s that the first Kyrgyz tribe submitted to tsarist rule. According to Prior (2002), it is at this particular moment that the political landscape of the region becomes chaotic. He asserts, 'A situation arose by the 1840s in which Kokandian and Russian commanders and Kirghiz and Kazakh chiefs and sultans were freely playing one another off against still others, with

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bride, and the bride would adopt the clan or tribal identity of her husband (these practices are strictly observed among the majority of the Kyrgyz today as well). If the husband died, even if long after the couple's marriage, the bride would still belong to the husband's kin group. The brideprice had to be paid back to the husband's family if the bride wanted to leave.

<sup>50</sup> TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 41, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> 'In the first half of the nineteenth century the Kokand Khanate occupied the easternmost part of Turkistan, bordering on the territories of outer Siberia in the north (from which it was separated by a stretch of barren steppe); Khiva and Bukhara in the west; Karategin (Qarategin), Darwaz and Kulab in the south; and the region of Kashghar (in East Turkistan, Xinjiang) in the east' (Bababekov 2005: 77).

<sup>52</sup> Sabol claims that Abulkhair of the Little Horde of the Kazakhs took the formal oath in 1734, while Ablai of the Middle Horde swore loyalty to the Russian government in 1740 (1998: 50-53). The Kalmyk incursions into Kazakh and Kyrgyz lands is given as one of the reasons for the formation of such alliances (Olcott 1987: 30). See also Wheeler (1964).

dangerous possibilities which only Russia had the strength to surmount in the end' (2002: 51).

When the Kazakhs rebelled against the Russian Empire in the 1830s under the leadership of Kenesary Kasymov, the Kazakh Sultan of Middle Horde, he was defeated and had to flee southwards into Kyrgyz lands to seek the protection of the Kokand Khanate (Sabol 1998). In doing so, Kenesary encountered the Ormon Khan of the Sarybagysh tribe of the Kyrgyz:

The Kazakh sultan Kenesary Kasimov, raised as khan in 1841 amid mass disturbances with the Russian command at Orenburg and the Kokand Khanate, was killed in 1847 by Kirghiz formations at Tokmak under Ormon and Jantay (father of Sabdan), Saribagis manaps nominally under Kokandian rule<sup>53</sup> who promised assistance to Russia to put down Kenesary's revolt (Prior 2002: 51).

In addition to these initial battles with the neighbouring Kazakh, Kyrgyz tribes also experienced internal warfare among themselves. In particular, the Bugu and Sarybagysh tribes were constantly at war with each other. In 1855 Ormon Khan, leader of the Sarybagysh, was captured and killed by the Bugu, who in the same year submitted to Russian rule, the first northern Kyrgyz tribe to do so. In spite of the Bugu enjoying Russian protection, in 1857 Ümötaaly, Ormon Khan's son, launched a deadly revenge attack on the Bugu near Issyk Kul which resulted in the seizure of all the Bugu's lands in the region. However, in 1862, only five years after this battle, Sarybagysh also submitted to Russian rule under the leadership of Jantay. Prior explains: 'Russia, however, by liquidating Kokand's fortresses one by one and by pressuring the Sarybagysh, Solto, and Sayak, was able to obtain the allegiance of the Northern Kirghiz tribes and gradually to secure peace in the Tian Shan' (Prior 2002: 52). In other words, Russian colonial rule in the second half of the nineteenth century did not meet heavy resistance from the native populations of northern Turkestan.<sup>54</sup>

Southern Turkestan, however, had quite different dynamics. Having the best agricultural land in Central Asia, the Fergana Valley also served as the administrative base of a series of khanates established by local populations. The collapse of the Kokand Khanate in 1876 sparked the total incorporation of the territory of the present-day Kyrgyz Republic as well as the Fergana Valley into Russian Imperial rule, which brought with it another set of challenges for local populations: 'Kyrgyzstan's incorporation into Russia's Turkestan governor-generalship prompted an influx of settlers into

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<sup>53</sup> Under the auspices of the Kokand Khanate since 1842 (Chorotegin and Moldokasymov 2000: 85).

<sup>54</sup> The Russian Empire secured its rule among the northern Kyrgyz tribes in 1863 (Chorotegin and Moldokasymov 2000: 87).

the lands of northern Kyrgyzstan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (Loring 2008: 4).<sup>55</sup> The Fergana Valley, on the other hand, became the centre of unrest and anti-colonial resentment against the Russian Empire. As one author argues:

The second half of the nineteenth century shows a regular and continuing pattern of political contests and disorders in Ferghana, which the Russian conquest of 1875-6 [which brought the Kokand khanate to an end] altered but did not interrupt. The khanate of Kokand contained a large class of politically active people, who from the 1840s to the 1870s became used to constant and violent political activity, and to the manipulation of dynastic politics for their own ends (Manz 1987: 281).

In 1898, at the height of these violent political activities, the Andijan rebellion took place. There are a variety of historical accounts speculating on the motivations behind the rebellion, but it was obvious that the conflict was exclusively directed against the Russians and was aimed at restoring the rule of the Kokand Khanate (Manz 1987). This rebellion is summarized by Adeeb Khalid (1998) as follows:

... about 2,000 followers of Madali (Dukchi) *Ishan*<sup>56</sup>, a minor Sufi *shaykh*, attacked the Russian barracks in Andijan and killed 22 soldiers while they slept and injured some 16 to 20. The insurgents, who were armed only with knives and cudgels, soon dispersed and were eventually hunted down. Russian retribution was swift: 18 of the insurgents were hanged, 360 were exiled to Siberia, and Mingtepe, Madali's village, was razed to the ground and replaced with a Russian settlement. The attack did not produce any other incidents, but it sent shock waves through Russian society and officialdom since it reaffirmed official fears about the thinness of Russian rule in Turkestan (1998: 57-58).<sup>57</sup>

This event is of particular importance and will be re-examined later in this chapter. It will suffice to reveal at this point that one of those exiled to Siberia was the famous Kyrgyz oral poet Toktogul Satylganov.

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<sup>55</sup> Emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861 also added to the growing number of settlers moving into arable lands in Central Asia.

<sup>56</sup> A spiritual guide: in this quotation, it refers to Sufi sheikhs.

<sup>57</sup> See Manz (1987: 276): 'It was a major surprise to the Russian administration and brought a reexamination and reinterpretation of earlier Fergana disturbances'.

### ***Major Poets and the Themes of their Poetry***

In my initial conversations with oral poets, the historical emergence of the institution of oral poetry and *aitysh* tended to be the starting point of my introduction to the long history of this oral tradition. According to mythological accounts, the existence of Kyrgyz oral poets dates back to the era of Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century. As the tale is told, the Kyrgyz, who at the time did not have a khan, asked the ‘Great Khan’ to send one of his sons to them to rule over them. Jochi<sup>58</sup>, the eldest son of Genghis Khan, was chosen and is considered to be the first and last khan of the Kyrgyz in history.<sup>59</sup> When Jochi died unexpectedly, no one could bring themselves to give the sad news to Genghis Khan. It was the Kyrgyz oral poet Buka Yrchy who, at the court of Genghis Khan, sang indirectly implying the death of Jochi, to which Genghis Khan responded, ‘*Ket, ket, ket Buka, Kebi suuk, it Buka*’<sup>60</sup>, (Akmataliev 2012: 10), and the name of the poet remains Ket Buka to this today. Obviously, this event is impossible to confirm historically. However, this account is significant less for its historical value than in showing how history is reconstructed and how Kyrgyz oral poets situate themselves between the rulers and the people as a class of prestigious performers whose job it is to speak truth to power, even if it means risking their own lives.

There is one popular proverb among the Kyrgyz referring to the significance of the status of oral poets among them, a proverb often invoked when the above story is told: ‘There is no death to the messenger and the poet’.<sup>61</sup> This is seen as guaranteeing the poet’s immunity and suggests a degree of detachment of the poets’ personality from their performances.<sup>62</sup> This point is significant in fully appreciating the place of oral poets in

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<sup>58</sup> In historical accounts too, Jochi joins his father in the campaign against the Kyrgyz (Soucek 2000: 107).

<sup>59</sup> This is also stated in Bartold (1963) and Soltonoev (1993) as a historical observation that the Kyrgyz, unlike the Kazakh and Uzbek, never had a khan. They had *biys* and *bays*, tribal chieftains, but never a confederation of tribes in a khanate. See Prior (2002, 2013) on the structure of governance among the pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz.

<sup>60</sup> ‘*Go, go, go Buka, With your cold words, dog Buka*’.

<sup>61</sup> ‘*Elchi menen yrchyga ölüm jok*’.

<sup>62</sup> A similar theme is explored in Dubuisson (2009): ‘This retraditionalization of history-as-cultural-authenticity was consistently invoked by poets and local scholars to explain why poets “get away with” political criticism. In this, the mythic ontology of *aitys*, legendary *akyndar* (poets) traveled extensively through the lands of a khanate, entertaining and gathering news. The poets would return to the khan and report the condition of the people and receive the patronage of the khan. The poets were the only ones in the court allowed to criticize the khan, because they did not speak for themselves, but for the khan’s people’ (2009: 106).

Kyrgyz social life. Since spontaneous improvisation is strongly related to inspiration, the skills needed for singing are often associated with 'blessings' and 'God-given gifts'. In addition to such attitudes towards oral poetry, invocations of the 'voice of the ancestors' further detach the oral poet's personality from his words. A poet cannot express his own opinion while singing, he can only judge an event with regard to traditional and commonly shared moral values. Thus, the oral poet becomes the voice of the wisdom of the people.<sup>63</sup>

As for the nineteenth century, this period accompanied the emergence of the most powerful master oral poets among the Kyrgyz and is commonly called 'the blossoming age of Kyrgyz oral poetry'. Kalygul Bai Uulu (1785-1855), Arstanbek Buulash Uulu (1824-1878), Esenaman (1833-1913), Jenijok (1860-1918), Eshmambet (1867-1926) and Toktogul (1864-1933) received their places in the pantheon of Kyrgyz oral poetic traditions in the pre-revolutionary era. Both Kalygul and Arstanbek were alternatively called *zamanchyl akyn*, literally 'poets of the times', due to their excessive focus on the major changes that took place during their lifetimes and the bleak future that they were convinced awaited their communities. Their poetic songs echoed the Russian Empire's military and administrative expansion into the heart of Central Asia, the influx of Russian settlers into its fertile lands and the disunity and constant struggles among the Kyrgyz tribes, as well as the broader peoples of Turkestan. The lyric-didactic works of *Tar Zaman* (Times of Hardship) of Kalygul and *Akyr Zaman* (the Apocalypse, Times of Destruction) of Arstanbek were sung in an apocalyptic tone depicting the miserable fate of Central Asian peoples. Thus, the main theme of the works of these oral poets is their concern with the change in the moral landscape that accompanied the political, economic and social transformations that were soon to take place. Due to their exclusive concern with imminent moral decay in their poetry, they were treated as philosophers (*oichul*), saints (*oliya*) and wise men (*akylman*) in their communities.

According to records available in the Manuscript Archive of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, Kalygul was a deeply religious person, an orator whose words had an impact on the people. He was a mentor and adviser to the notables Törökeldi and Ormon Khan of the Sarybagysh tribe<sup>64</sup> and was sent to Khudayar in the Kokand Khanate as an ambassador a number of times.<sup>65</sup> Basing his views on the local oral history collected

<sup>63</sup> This point is quite relevant to Bloch's theory of oratory and social control, and will be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>64</sup> Soltonoyev also confirms Kalygul's capacity as the counsellor of Khan Ormon. AANKR f. 1057, p. 272.

<sup>65</sup> AANKR f. 1319, pp. 29-34.

through ethnographic and folkloric expeditions in the early Soviet era, Abdyl'dajan Akmat'aliyev (2012) elaborates on Kalygul as follows:

Regarding his place in the community and his deeds, people remembered Kalygul as a highly esteemed person who was well-known as a just arbitrator not only in his tribe; as a fair judge, he was involved in the process of resolution of the conflicts and fights between large tribes as well. Not only that, he was also actively involved in the interrelations between communities like the Kazakh and Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz and Russians, etc., playing a prominent, influential role (2012: 95).

Kalygul's advice to Khan Ormon in his dealings with the Kazakh and Russians is widely known among the Kyrgyz (Akmat'aliyev 2012: 116):

Don't brag of your animals,  
Don't attack lots of Kazakhs,  
Their animals you may take,  
But you'll perish in their steppe. (p. 237)

Most likely, these lines refer to Ormon Khan's battle with Kenesary Khan of the Kazakhs during which Ormon kills his Kazakh offender in 1847. Kalygul accuses Ormon of 'eating, yet hungry, not heeding to warnings'. He prophesizes what could happen to him if he continues in this way:

Russians will take your land,  
And will break your back,  
Heed my words,  
(Or) You will see your end. (p. 237)

Arstanbek is another philosopher-poet, a master oral poet, melodist and epic singer of the pre-revolutionary era who was described as a 'role model of the poets of his time with his mastery of oral poetic composition' (Samanchin 1941: 90). Most of the materials about his life and works were collected by the Tatar folklorist Miftakhov and submitted to the manuscript archive in 1922. Moreover, much of his didactic poetry and many accounts of his *aitysh* with other poets, which were collected and written down in the Arabic alphabet in 1933 by Kabai Abdyrakmanov, were discovered in 1993.

Arstanbek began singing at a very early age and was a renowned singer by the age of 16. According to semi-legendary accounts, when officials of the Kokand Khanate arrested the notable members of his clan, including Arstanbek's father,

Arstanbek went after them, sang his poetry, and won the hearts of the officials with his poetic skills, and [helped] set free his clan elders, including his own father. He stayed in Fergana region for a year, travelled to Namangan and Andijan, and dueled with a lot of oral poets and *komuz* players; he proved the superiority of his art and returned to his home as a master oral poet (Asanov 2004: 67).

He is best known for his works on the devastating impacts of the expansion of the Russian imperial borders into Central Asia. He was especially concerned with the flood of changes that accompanied the colonial administration of the Kyrgyz tribes and noted a decline in traditional norms and values and, broadly speaking, in the moral landscape among the Kyrgyz. The intertribal solidarity of the Kyrgyz and the brotherhood of the peoples of the region are among the major themes he sang about, in which he implored the tribal elite to heed his advice. In order to stop the battles between the Sarybagysh and Bugu tribes and to call for solidarity between the two peoples (*eki eldi yntymaktashtyruu maksatynda*), he advised the Sarybagysh not to take revenge against the Bugu for their killing of Ormon Khan (Akmataliev 2012: 183):

A wood can be found,  
A felt can be woven,  
O, Sarybagysh brothers,  
If you split Bugu into three,  
Ormon of Esenkul,  
Where will you find him?  
Bugu won't die with your raid,  
O, Sarybagysh brothers,  
Ormon of Esenkul,  
Will not revive from the dead (p. 237)

As the war between the two tribes continued and the Bugu tribe was displaced from their lands, Arstanbek 'voices the tormenting fate that befell on his people' (Akmataliev 2012: 185):

Divided our people,  
We are like a roe deer.  
Wandering in the steppes,  
We are like a lame horse.  
Silent, when hit on the head  
We are as if lifeless. (p. 238)



His didactic verses were directed not only to the masses, but also to the tribal elites, for they were responsible for the fate of their people. The following lines are one of the best examples of such poetry, and they have continued to inspire the Kyrgyz past and present:

Even if your fame touches the sun,  
Your arms reach to the star,  
Creation of the God  
You hold in your hand,  
You are noble with your people,  
You will regret being without them. (p. 238)

The legacy of the pre-revolutionary oral poets among the Kyrgyz was established through the performances of poets such as Kalygul and Arstanbek, whose role in society was that of wise man, orator, philosopher and historian; furthermore, they were men who were primarily concerned with the well-being and solidarity of their communities, being those who advised the people about their future. Their works were not banned in the Soviet era, though folklorists and linguists were discouraged from researching them. For the Soviet state, there were two main challenges in promoting these oral poets: first, they were religious, and second, because their lives were involved with the courts of the tribal elite, they represented the very feudal-patriarchal survivals the Soviet state was determined to eliminate. The members of the next generation of legendary Kyrgyz oral poets, Esenaman and Eshmambet, were mostly famous for their poetry duels and involvement in regional festivals. Jenijok, who was quite a religious oral poet, had a long body of *terme*, *nasyiat* poetry, alongside his well-known victorious performances in poetry duels.<sup>66</sup> Although these poets were strong representatives of the oral poetic art, for Soviet-era party officials it was Toktogul Satylganov who stood out as the greatest Kyrgyz oral poet of all times. Accordingly his biography could be promoted as the biography of his people, who, together with him, lived through the old times and were witnessing the dawn of the new one.

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<sup>66</sup> One such poetry duel between Jenijok and Eshmambet is reproduced in the Appendix.

## Toktogul or the Birth of Kyrgyz Soviet Oral Poetry

### *‘Toktogul’s Biography’*

There are no concrete data on the early life of Toktogul Satylganov. According to oral history accounts he was born in Sasyk Jiy village in Ketmen-Töbö region in 1864.<sup>67</sup> He started singing very early, at the age of thirteen, and established himself as a famous oral poet in the region with his popular oral poetry performances and his skills in oral poetry duels. His mother, who was a *koshokchu*, a funeral mourner, and a talented singer of the tales of the village, is considered to have influenced him initially (Tashtemirov 1968). Later he was apprenticed to the famous poets of the era, Chondu and Esenaman, accompanying them on their trips, on which he observed their performances, as well as taking part in poetry duels with them. Following in the footsteps of these and earlier oral poets, Toktogul was also intimately linked with the social and political life around him. The life of the poet was transformed dramatically when he reached his early thirties due to the political events that were taking place in the Fergana Valley.

After the fall of the Kokand Khanate in 1876, growing discontent with the policies of the Russian colonial administration reached its peak among the native populations in southern Turkestan. While Russian rule in the region had stabilized the regional conflicts between the different tribes, as well as offering protection to the native populations from foreign incursions, ideological opposition to the Russian presence in the Fergana Valley did not end, even after two decades had passed since the fall of the Khanate. One of the largest uprisings took place in Andijan in May 1898, when approximately two thousand rebels attacked the Russian garrisons in the region, killing a number of soldiers. The rebellion was suppressed immediately before the simultaneous uprisings that had been planned in other cities could take place.

The poet Toktogul, who was 34 years old at the time, was immediately hunted and finally found at the Iyri-Suu encampment, where he was arrested and charged with involvement in the rebellion by the Russian imperial military tribunal on 18 May 1898. A rich body of historical scholarship describes the motivations behind Toktogul’s arrest. According to one source, in line with Soviet historiography, the events leading to the poet’s conviction resulted from the tribal elites’ frustration with Toktogul’s concern for the fate of his community, as expressed in his performances. His poem entitled *Besh Kaman* (‘Team of Five’), describes ‘The cruelty of

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<sup>67</sup> The region was named after the poet Toktogul in 1940.

kinsmen of Ryskulbek who robbed the poor and destitute in the village with savagery, like “an eagle with poisoned nails” (Akmataliev 2012: 344).<sup>68</sup> He even goes on to name these five people explicitly in his poem, calling them ‘deceivers, liars, accomplices’. Thus, Ryskulbek’s kinsmen had been waiting for the right moment to deal with the poet, and the 1898 Andijan rebellion gave them their opportunity. As local administrators and thus part of the regional administration of the Russian Empire, they provided the military tribunal with false intelligence that Toktogul had been actively involved in the rebellion.

Although there is no clear evidence to this date as to whether Toktogul played any role in the rebellion, data from the manuscript archive suggests that those who organized the rebellion had communicated with the poet a year before it took place. According to a statement in the manuscript archive dated 1928, given by Nikolai Ladushev, a farmer who interviewed Toktogul, the poet says, ‘... in 1897, I first met his master and learnt about a rebellion the people of Fergana were organizing to overthrow the tsarist government in Fergana, expel the *bai-manaps* and noble tsarist officials from the local administrations and create a big and strong Muslim state’.<sup>69</sup> The court documents of the investigations made by the military tribunal also confirms Toktogul’s statement, as written down by Ladushev:

In confirmation of his statement, the governor of Suusamyr *volost*<sup>70</sup>, Bakhtiyar Ryskulbekov, explained that on 20th of May he heard rumours that some powerful Kyrgyz of Suusamyr *volost* gathered in Shadybek Khalfa’s place in Uzun-Akhmat region to talk about the future Muslim state, to discuss their help to *ishan* of Mingtepe region, by first conquering Namangan town.<sup>71</sup>

Ryskulbek named the individuals who attended those meetings, including Toktogul. In confirmation, Omor Sooronov (2014) notes, ‘A year before the rebellion, [he] together with three emissary from Andijan, Shadybek Khalfa, Törö Beshkempirov, Ümötäaly Bagyshbekov and the owner of the house, Moldo Törökan, met secretly, and [he] was informed about the meaning and scope of the rebellion’ (Sooronov 2014: 59). The fact that Toktogul was at the court of the rebellion’s ideologues and supported the rebellion in his poetry performances in order to motivate the people of the region was, the author maintains, considered sufficient for his conviction. Sooronov adds that, given the socio-political conditions of the time, it would have been

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<sup>68</sup> This name, which was popularized by the Soviet historians working on Toktogul’s life, is still used for a classic feudal oppressor among the Kyrgyz.

<sup>69</sup> AANKR f. 1256.

<sup>70</sup> An administrative-territorial unit used in the Russian imperial era and early Soviet era.

<sup>71</sup> AANKR f. 1259, p. 104.

impossible to imagine Toktogul, an eminent oral poet of the region, refraining from such political activities of his community (Sooronov 2014: 60). Ladushev's handwritten account of Toktogul's statement sheds light on the excitement the poet felt towards a revolution: 'What a turning point, it has so impressed me and changed my life. I couldn't say or explain anything, the planned rebellion completely carried me away, and it met my inner desires to take revenge on tsarist officials and the local aristocracy'.<sup>72</sup>

At this particular juncture, I wish to draw attention to a crucial point: in consideration of all the available sources related to the topic, it cannot be confirmed historically whether or not there existed any animosity between Toktogul and the tribal elites, whether the poetry in which the poet berated the tribal elites had been sung before his arrest, or whether Ladushev's interview with Toktogul was a true statement. Regardless of this vagueness, however, one thing is certain – the Russian imperial administration initially sentenced Toktogul and the other 'criminals' to death, though the sentence was later reduced to exile, a journey that began for him in August 1898. He spent the following year in a Moscow prison awaiting the prisoners' final placements before spending two years in Tobolsk in Tyumen Province, Russia. Then on 11 June 1901 a decree was issued to send the prisoners who had been exiled to Tobolsk to be transported to the Aleksandrovskiy Tsentral, a hard-labour camp in Irkutsk Province, where Toktogul remained for the next three years (July 1901 to August 1904).

In 1904 Toktogul escaped from the labour camp and, according to one account, returned to his native village in 1905 (Moldokasymov 1990: 20). Between 1905 and 1910 he lived a difficult life, as he lacked official documentation showing he had been released from prison. In April 1910 he sent a petition to the administration of Fergana province requesting permission to reside legally in his village. Almost immediately he was arrested a second time, though he was released four months later after his fellow villagers paid his ransom money. According to many oral historical accounts, his second arrest was also linked to the local tribal elites, who reportedly filed complaints about him with the regional authorities. With the arrival of the Bolshevik Revolution, the atrocious behaviour meted out to Toktogul by the regional elites died down, and the poet literally welcomed the revolution with open arms.

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<sup>72</sup> AANKR f. 1256.

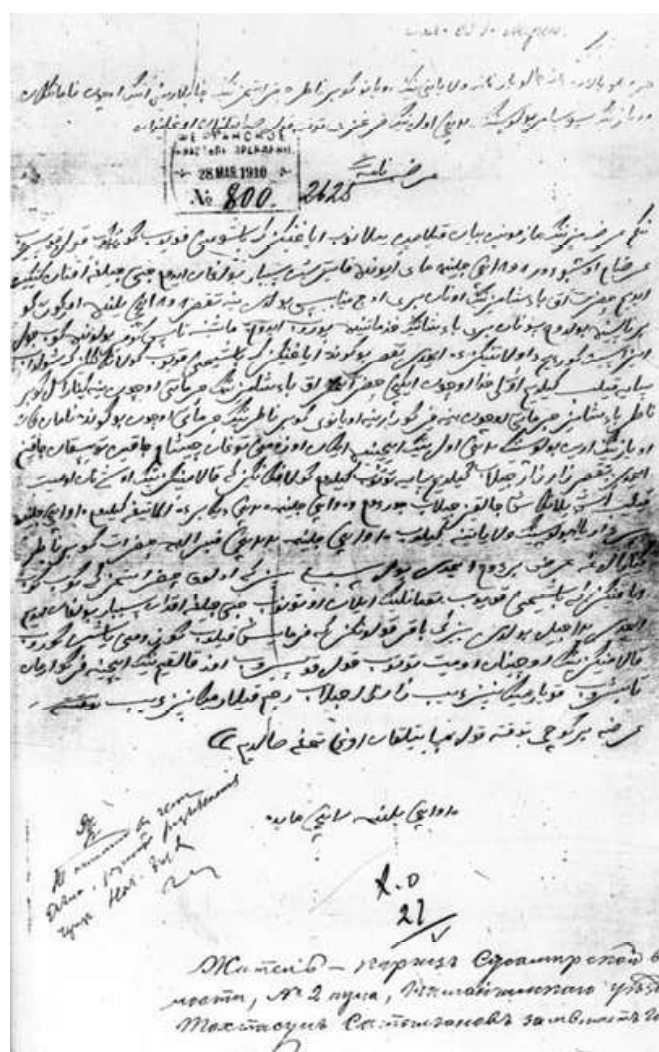


Plate 1. Toktogul's petition: 'A copy of the petition of *akyn-demokrat* Toktogul Satylganov requesting permission to live in Ketmen-Töbö from 7 May 1910 onwards. At the time, he was in prison in Namangan city, following his escape from Siberia'.

Toktogul died in 1933, at the age of 69. Only small pieces of his poetry and melodies were collected from him during his lifetime. He was not even visited by Miftakov, the famous folklorist who travelled across the Kyrgyz lands and established a large collection of Kyrgyz folklore (Muratov 2014: 3-4). When Toktogul was invited by the party officials to Frunze for employment five years prior to his death, he was informed that he was too old and was sent back to his home town. The famous musicologist Zatayevich wrote eighteen of his melodies down on this occasion (Muratov 2014: 6-7). However, although he knew many of the epics and oral traditions of the Kyrgyz, none of his versions were ever written down (Tashtemirov 1975: 119; Asanov 2004: 210). There are two main reasons why, perhaps, he

was given little attention over the span of his lifetime. First, he had, after all, allegedly played a part in the Andijan rebellion, the motivations behind which stemmed from anti-Russian hostility.

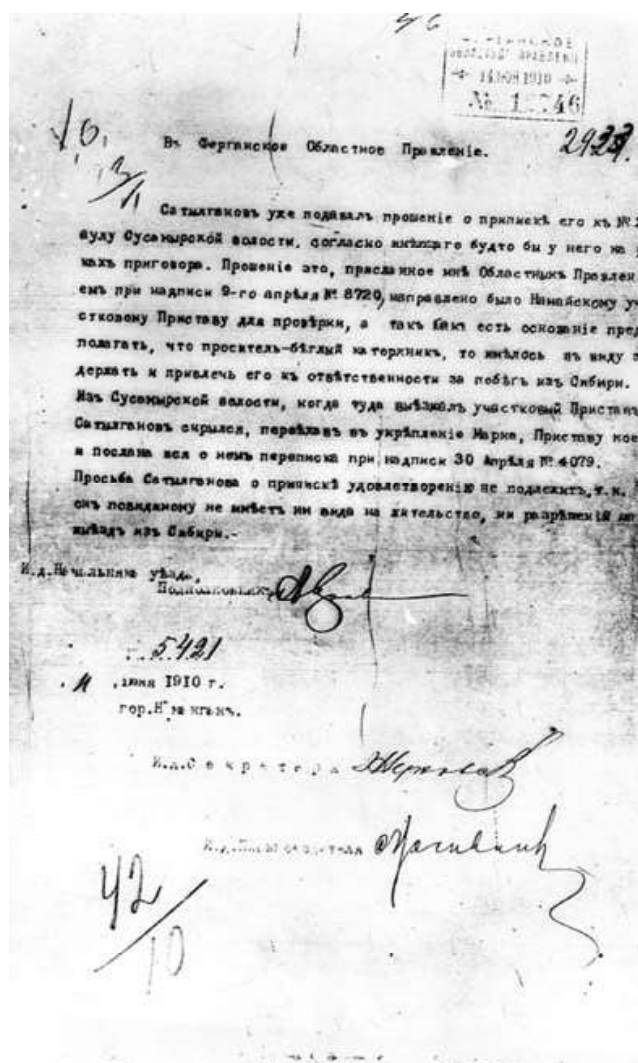


Plate 2. Response to Toktogul's petition: 'A copy of the decree of chief of Namangan district of Fergana province in response to the petition of *akyn-demokrat* Toktogul Satylganov granting him residence permit in Ketmentobo from 11 June 1910'.

Indeed, what made him legendary only posthumously, namely his alleged involvement in the rebellion against colonial rule, was also the very reason why he was not highly valued in his lifetime. Secondly, the role and place of folklore in the ideal socialist culture had not yet been decided by the Communist Party's cadres, and Toktogul passed away one year before Gorky made his powerful speech at the first congress of the All-Union

Soviet Writers, which declared folklore and oral traditions to be representative of proletarian culture.



Plate 3. Toktogul's (centre) only picture, taken during his visit to Bishkek in 1928.

Throughout his life, Toktogul was popular among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz and was also the master of all the well-known Kyrgyz oral poets at the time. However, it was not until after his death that he was made a legendary figure of Soviet-Kyrgyz national culture. Toktogul's biography had been one of the most significant factors in party officials deciding to promote the institution of oral poetry performances among the Kyrgyz in the Soviet era. The fact that he was oppressed by both the regional colonial administration and their accomplices – the traditional Kyrgyz elites – and that he spent seven years of his life exiled in labour camps transformed Toktogul into a victim of colonial and feudal oppression and a hero of the class struggle. The hardships he faced throughout his life were testament to the legitimacy of Soviet rule, and as such was he promoted.

### ***Toktogul's Legacy: The Discourse of 'akyn-demokrat'***

Toktogul's life story and his works are immune from criticism among the Kyrgyz as an apprentice of the legendary poets of the previous generation and the master of the next generation of oral poets such as Kalyk, Osmonkul, and Alymkul. All of them travelled long distances to meet him, give him a ritual greeting performance and receive his blessings to become his apprentice before their fame spread among the Kyrgyz. Essentially, to criticize Toktogul is to criticize a highly esteemed tradition.

My people's oppressors,  
*Bai-manaps* are expelled.  
 Children with weak horses,  
 Washed away their sweat.  
 Those eating Nikolai's bread,  
 Did not reach their aims.  
 Freedom flashed on us,  
 Lighting up our fortune.  
 What mother gave birth,  
 To a son like Lenin?

(p. 238)

When I asked one of my informants what he thought about the piece of poetry quoted above, his response was not too different from that of any other Kyrgyz I asked:

If the Soviets had not come, the Kyrgyz people would continue living like slaves (*kuldai jashamakmyz*) at the hands of the Russian Empire and *bai-manaps*. Poets sing for the people, they sing their concerns, their difficulties. As for Toktogul, he not only saw his people suffer at the hands of *bai-manaps*, he also suffered from their oppression himself when he was sent in exile, and he stayed there for nine years [sic, seven years]. Then, when the Soviets came to our lands, of course he was happy, because the people were happy. How could you expect a *tökmö akyn* to stay away from his community [by not sharing the happiness of his people]?<sup>73</sup>

This quote, which is quite reflective of the official Soviet historiography of the Kyrgyz people in the pre-revolutionary era, should be read against the backdrop of Toktogul's immunity. His life was a prime example of the oppressive and corrupt practices of the older era during which tribal elites and Russian officials were exploiting the masses. His works welcoming the Bolshevik Revolution, the praise of its leader and contrasting the new era with the old one were translated into nineteen languages.<sup>74</sup>

In Toktogul's character Communist party officials saw an exemplary local man whose fortune had changed dramatically with the Bolshevik Revolution. He was emboldened as a role model, not only for other Soviet-era oral poets, who were without exception his apprentices, but also for all Kyrgyz, who were supposed to follow the advice of the great Kyrgyz oral

<sup>73</sup> From an interview with a young Kyrgyz, 12 November 2013.

<sup>74</sup> The last two lines of the poem above, 'What mother gave birth to a son like Lenin?' are famous among the Kyrgyz. Its Russian translation is also quoted frequently to express the social support behind the Revolution among the peoples of the peripheries: '*Kakaya zhenshchina rodila, takogo syna, kak Lenin?*'



poet.<sup>75</sup> Toktogul's support of the Revolution through his poetry was projected as representative of the social support behind the party, making it shameful for the Kyrgyz to disagree with their own famous poet. Due to his rebellion against the feudal oppressors, for which he was punished severely, Toktogul was referred to as *akyn-demokrat*, the first Kyrgyz oral poet to be called such. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, thanks to the party's endless promotion of the poet both nationally and internationally, Toktogul Satylganov became one of the most famous Kyrgyz of the twentieth century.

Toktogul's legacy was gradually established, starting with the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics being named after the poet in 1938. Next, his name was entered into almost every document relating to the conditions of Kyrgyz art, music and folklore. In their assessment of the state of affairs in Kyrgyz art, composers Fere and Vlasov maintained that

The national culture of the Kyrgyz did not develop at all at the time of the *bai-manap*. In the Soviet era it is blossoming and attaining the highest level of success. Toktogul Satylganov, the most noticeable representative of Kyrgyz national culture, is the most talented composer, *akyn* and poet<sup>76</sup>: he fought for the poor and destitute. For singing the truth frankly in his performances, he was sent to exile in Siberia.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Toktogul's poetry lines served as a point of reference from many Soviet-Kyrgyz political leaders throughout the Soviet era. In his article written in honour of the fifteenth anniversary of the Kyrgyz SSR, T. Kulatov, the Chairman of the Kyrgyz SSR Council of People's Commissars, quotes Toktogul's lines on the happy people. *Güldögön Eldin Mayramy* ('Festival of Blossoming People'), *Kyzyl Kyrgyzstan*, 1951.

<sup>76</sup> In fact, he was only an oral poet: being illiterate, he did not write down any of his poetry. He is called a poet here in the sense that his works were written down and published posthumously.

<sup>77</sup> TsGAKR, f. 1603, op. 1, d. 41, p. 62.

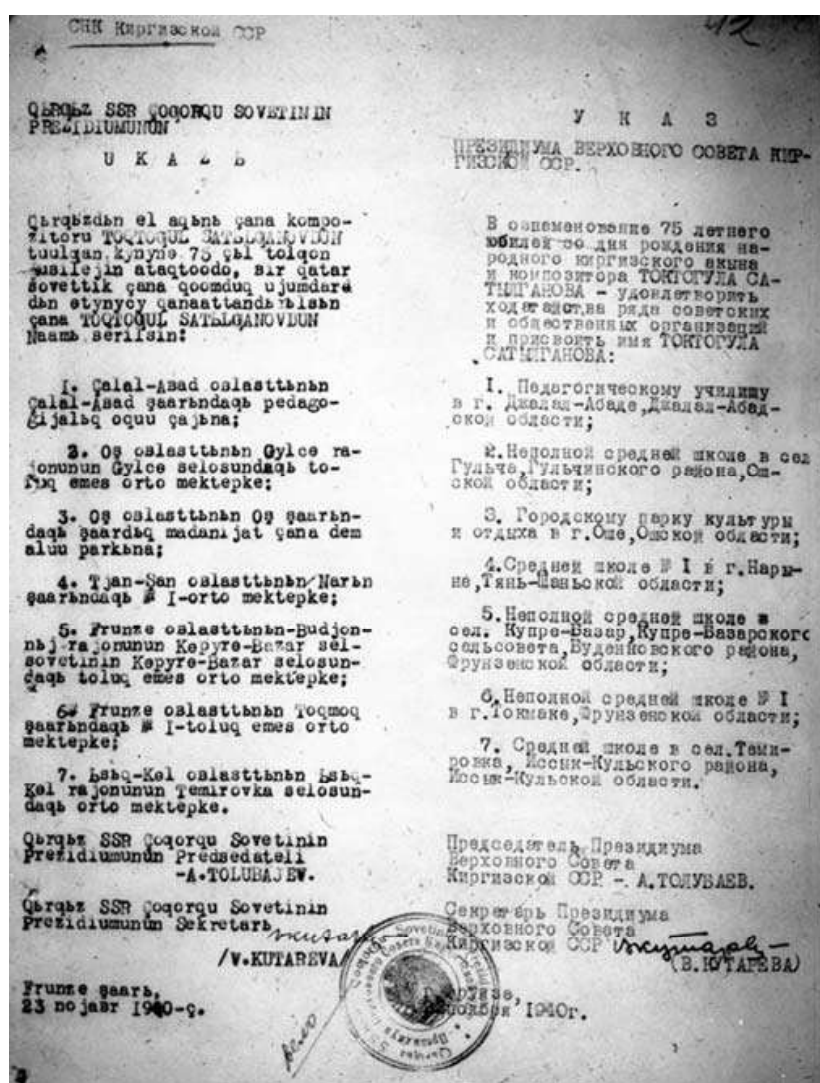


Plate 4. Toktogul's 75th anniversary: 'The decree of the Kyrgyz SSR Supreme Soviet on the renaming of some social institutions after Toktogul Satylganov' as part of preparations for the poet's 75th birthday in 1940.

Stage plays and films on the life of the poet were mass produced for use in educating the masses in rural Kyrgyz SSR. The director of the Theatre Department under the Ministry of Culture, who supervised stage plays in the region, reported in *Sovetskaya Kirgizia* that a young director of the amateur *kolkhoz* theatre 'Kainar' in the town of Balykchy called Koichumanov had put on a spectacle on Toktogul's life which entertained and educated the audience, while at the same time arousing sentiments of hatred towards the past: 'More than a thousand *kolkhozniki* watched the play'.<sup>78</sup> In August 1939, Mosfilm, the state film-production enterprise based in Moscow, wrote a letter to the Writers' Union of the Kyrgyz SSR stating that they were

<sup>78</sup> *Sovetskaya Kirgizia*, 21.06.1939.

planning a movie on the Kyrgyz SSR the following year and had decided that its central theme would be Toktogul Satylganov 'because Toktogul's biography is tightly linked to the history of the revolutionary struggle of the Kyrgyz, as well as to the later progression of Soviet Kyrgyzstan'.<sup>79</sup>

The celebrations of his 75th anniversary were scheduled to take place in October 1940, for which the preparations had begun six months earlier.<sup>80</sup> According to the resolution, a committee was established to oversee the organization of the anniversary, which was intended to be a historic event: 'The jubilee of Toktogul Satylganov shall be the greatest cultural and political event in the life of the Kyrgyz people'. Indeed, the list of preparations predicted the scope of the event that was planned to take place:

- his poetry collections were published as the earliest step in the preparations;
- exhibitions devoted to his life and works were planned;
- jubilee committees at the province, city and regional levels were established;
- seminars devoted to him were designed to take place in every factory, enterprise, *kolkhoz-sovkhoz*, school and university;
- seminars held by artists, *akyns*, poets and writers at 'jubilee nights' to teach the life and works of Toktogul 'in all aspects' were scheduled;
- a major concert in Frunze [now Bishkek] on the literary and musical heritage of the poet was planned;
- a stage play which would go into the repertoire of all provincial and regional theatres was devised<sup>81</sup>;
- the Writers' Union was asked to take a very active role in the process;
- radio stations, national and regional newspapers and journals were tasked with covering the anniversary of the poet vigorously.

The poet's centenary was made into an even bigger event. The report on the Toktogul's anniversary celebrations states that media, scientific, cultural and art institutions achieved a certain degree of success in propaganda terms in respect of the literary and musical heritage of the 'great *akyn-demokrat*'<sup>82</sup>:

<sup>79</sup> 16 August 1939. TsGAPDKR, f. 1465, op. 1, d. 12, p. 220.

<sup>80</sup> 'Resolution on celebration of 75th anniversary of national poet Toktogul Satylganov', 27 April 1940. TsGAPDKR, f. 1465, op.1, d. 12, pp. 32-94.

<sup>81</sup> Mentioned in a separate document, TsGAPDKR, f. 56, op. 4, d. 171, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> 'Results of Toktogul Satylganov's anniversary celebrations and necessity for further studies and propaganda of life and works of the great Kyrgyz *akyn-demokrat*', TsGAPDKR, f. 56, op. 4, d. 1537, pp. 85-88.

- additional volumes of books published on Toktogul, including the field of children's literature;
- his poem on Lenin translated into nineteen languages of the Soviet SSR;
- scholars published articles on him; writers, painters and musicians prepared their works for the anniversary;
- history and art museums held exhibitions, as did schools, universities, clubs and libraries;
- conference and seminars dedicated to his life were organized;
- preparation and celebration of the anniversary was covered extensively on TV, radio and in the newspapers;
- central newspapers *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and *Literaturnaya Gazetta* published articles on the *akyn-demokrat*;
- badges with the poet's picture were struck; table sculptures, anniversary medals, bronze bas-reliefs, postage stamps and agitation posters containing his poetry were produced;
- The Academy of Sciences and the National University held workshops; the Writers' Union had special gatherings with composers, painters and journalists on the dissemination of his work;
- representatives from all the Union countries attended meetings dedicated to the poet;
- a jubilee night was held in the House of the Unions (*Dom Sayuzov*) and the House of the Composers (*Dom Kompozitorov*) in Moscow;
- finally, a tall statue of the poet was arranged to be erected in Frunze.

However, the report maintains that 'Toktogology (*sic*, 'the science of Toktogul' or, as written in the document, *Toktogulovedeniya*) has its shortcomings'. Therefore the Academy of Sciences should set up a group of scholars on Toktogul (*Toktoguloved*) to carry out textual analysis of his works; the Writers' Union should keep up the task of collecting his works among the people; the universities should put on special courses on Toktogul; and a museum dedicated to the poet should be established in Frunze.

The *Toktogulophilia* of the party officials was not confined to his various anniversaries, since his biography and works not only legitimized Soviet rule, they also codified the role of Kyrgyz oral poets within the socialist modernization project. The next generations of oral poets were judged in terms of their observance of the *akyn-demokrat* tradition started by Toktogul. They also consolidated their position as notable Kyrgyz oral poets

by making reference to their acquaintance with their master, which also made a difference in the eyes of party officials. As is written in the professional résumé of one of his apprentices, ‘Alymkul Üsönbayev learnt from Toktogul to sing political messages in his performances. Toktogul taught him the place of *akyns* in society in the new era’.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

In the pre-revolutionary era, the oral poetry performances of *tökmö akyns* do not come across as a fixed body of oral traditions sung by a class of professional singers. Rather, oral poets were heavily embedded in the social and political life around them, and the messages conveyed in their performances were closely linked to the circumstances in which they were created and performed. This is not to suggest that any piece of oral tradition was immune from the social and political changes in the communities in which they were created, transmitted and performed. On the contrary, as explained in Chapter 1, homeostasis is a precondition for the resilience of oral traditions. I therefore suggest that Kyrgyz oral poets were more concerned with the present than the past. Their poetry not only expressed their feelings and thoughts, they themselves also became the central domain in which traditional norms and values were transmitted. The poetry duels that usually took place in regional feasts were regarded by the regional elites as ideal arenas for demonstrating their own prestige and status through the competitive exchanges of their court poets in performing their poetry. The fact that oral poets improvised their poetry nurtured a profound admiration of their artistic skills as well as their spirituality.

From the mythological accounts of Ket Buka’s performance at the court of Genghis Khan to the later oral historical accounts of the role and status of Kalygul and Arstanbek in their communities and lastly to Toktogul’s involvement in the 1898 Andijan rebellions and his relations with the regional elite, all this helped consolidate the role and status of oral poets and their performances among the Kyrgyz. The traditional authority of the oral poets among the Kyrgyz thus stemmed from their active participation in the transformation of the social, political and moral landscape of their communities. The status of Kyrgyz oral poets was not assessed any differently by party officials in the first decades of the Revolution. It had already become clear to them in the early 1920s that these traditional channels of communication could also be used by once again making the oral poets part of the social, political and moral transformation that the party intended to achieve.

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<sup>83</sup> TsGAKR, f. 2799, op. 1.

For the party officials, Toktogul's life created a viable starting point for systematizing the institution of oral poetry. The fact that he spent seven years in exile after conviction on circumstantial evidence and that he was already a master poet, famous among not only the Kyrgyz but also Kazakhs and Uzbeks before the Bolshevik Revolution made him a priceless asset that party officials exploited until the end of the Soviet era. A full-scale campaign to uphold Toktogul as the apotheosis of Kyrgyz oral poetry began shortly after his death. While his biography and poetry endorsing the Bolshevik Revolution were expected to draw more social support for the legitimacy of Soviet rule, the *akyn-demokrat* tradition associated with him was in reality an invented Soviet tradition to which the oral poets of later generations were expected to adhere.



### ***Chapter 3***

## **Improvising Socialism: Party, Poets and Patronage in the Soviet Era**

The first decade of the Soviet era, especially the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1921-1928), was flexible in many respects due to Lenin's idea of a gradual revolution, which, to a certain degree, had to rely on the old regime's intelligentsia before the Communist Party could establish a new popular intelligentsia of its own. However, the idea of a gradual revolution was not tolerable to many, and the inception of the First Five-Year plan (FFYP) in 1928 was particularly welcomed by the young communists, since 'it was a time of unprecedented opportunity. They provided much of the real enthusiasm behind the rhetoric of transforming nature, creating the New Man, and "catching up and overtaking" the industrialized West' (Fitzpatrick 1992: 240). It had also been decided that 'rationalization' was a precondition for industrialization, this being linked to the task of raising the cultural level of both the cadres and the masses: 'The demand to raise the cultural level of the worker-peasant masses, the demand to carry out a broad and profound "cultural revolution" in the country, is evident; it is now really "in the air"' (*Pravda* editorial 30 November 1927; cited in Fitzpatrick 1974: 39).

However, as the first decade of the revolution drew to a close, there was growing disagreement between the party cadres and the cultural establishment, and more specifically between the bourgeois intelligentsia and the Bolshevik party elite, as to how 'culture' should be defined and represented. The political confrontation between the communists, who were promoting a 'proletarian' culture, and the intelligentsia, who were endorsing a 'bourgeois' culture, was won by the former, thus setting the tone for the FFYP era (1928-1932) (Fitzpatrick 1992; Slezkine 1994a; David-Fox 1999). Consequently, the period between 1928 and 1932 not only brought with it rapid industrialization and total collectivization of the agricultural sector, it also launched the revolution on a third front, that of culture (Fitzpatrick 1992: 240).



The concept of a ‘cultural revolution’ was formulated in the 1920s by the Bolshevik party leadership. In Western scholarship, Sheila Fitzpatrick (1974, 1978) used the term to refer to the period between 1928 and 1932, during which a cultural class war ended in the victory of the ‘hardliners’ over the ‘soft-liners’. Michael David-Fox partially agrees with Fitzpatrick’s argument, claiming that in 1928 the ‘cultural revolution became part of an all-union campaign linked to the party’s “left turn”, [and] the extreme formulations of the mid-1920s became the new mainstream’ (1999: 183). Nevertheless he suggests that, rather than considering the cultural revolution to be a concrete phenomenon compressed into a particular period in Soviet history, it should be understood as a cultural dimension of the overall revolution. More broadly, it was not only an internal cultural revolution designed to fashion the revolutionary vanguard, but also ‘an “external” cultural revolution, aimed outward at both civilizing and Sovietizing the backward, not yet “conscious” masses’, a Bolshevik cultural project with both a positive, ‘civilizing and enlightening program’ and a negative agenda that was ‘militant, antibourgeois, antispecialist, *antipasseiste*’ (David-Fox 1999: 182).

Like David-Fox, I interpret the concept of the cultural revolution as it was coined and made a priority as early as the revolutionary agenda in the NEP era, when it emerged ‘from the creation of a new intelligentsia, development of party education, formulation of a Communist ethics or morality, pursuit of a new kind of science, to a revolution in habits, customs, and *byt* [everyday life]’ (David-Fox 1999: 190). I adopt the term in this chapter to refer to the ‘transformation of the *byt*’<sup>84</sup> and the ways and methods the party utilized to reach this aim, using the term interchangeably with ‘socialist modernization project’. The transformation of the *byt* as I use it in the chapter refers, more broadly, to the spread of literacy, the introduction of hygiene, the abolition of superstition, the promotion of gender equality, the inculcation of a socialist morality and of work discipline, or simply the making of the New Soviet Person.

### **Revolution through ‘Culture’ and Its Paradoxes**

The transformation of everyday life had to be achieved through the cultural revolution in order to construct the new Soviet person. In 1920s, the Russian word for culture, or *kul’tura*, was used to reference literature and the arts, or high culture (Fitzpatrick 1992; Boym 1994), whereas the word *kultur’nost* meant ‘culturedness’ or ‘being cultured’. In this sense, the connotation of

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<sup>84</sup> For other literature on *byt*, see Boym (1994), Slezkine (1994a), Kotkin (1995), Fitzpatrick (1999).

*kultur'nost'*<sup>85</sup> was distinct from *kul'tura* since it referred to manners and modes of behaviour in the sphere of everyday life, a transformation of which was a precondition for the cultivation of the new Soviet man:

It is in Stalin's time that the word 'culture' acquired an important suffix, and the slogan of the 1920s 'cultural revolution' turned into the advocacy of *kul'turnost'*. This term includes not only the new Soviet artistic canon but also manners, ways of behavior, and discerning taste in food and consumer goods. Culturalization is a way of translating ideology into the everyday; it is a kind of Stalinist 'civilizing process' (Boym 1994: 105).

In his work on 'the small peoples of the North', Yuri Slezkine argues that the war against 'backwardness' was an aspect of the Great Transformation which was no less significant than the collectivization campaign: 'The "socialist offensive" was to involve a wholesale cultural revolution that would replace all antiquated customs, beliefs, and practices with civilized norms of behavior and the new scientific ideology' (1994a: 219). He suggests that, before a loyal group of future leaders could be recruited from local populations in line with the politics of *korenizatsiia* [literally indigenization or nativization], the Russians had to carry out a war on backwardness for which they needed 'local allies'.<sup>86</sup> The need to recruit allies from among local populations repeatedly appears in the literature. The cultural level of the masses had to be lifted so that the civilizing mission could target those who lagged behind: peasants, national minorities and women. David-Fox sees a methodological paradox in the implementation of these civilizing missions: 'those most in need of aid were the most obviously removed, [as] the revolutionary vanguard had the least foothold among them; hence the raising up, it was taken for granted, had to come from above and from without' (1999: 191).

Unlike the class war against the rich peasants (the so-called *kulaks*), or *dekulakization*, constructing a socialist culture, Slezkine argues, was a more

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<sup>85</sup> The antonym of *kul'turnost* was *beskul'ture* or uncultured (literally 'without culture'), and thus, backward.

<sup>86</sup> In his discussion of cultural *korenizatsiia*, Rouland argues that 'Cultural *korenizatsiia* is a conceptual extension of the general policy whereby, just as political participation was "nativized" by the promotion of local cadres and proclamations were "nativized" through the use of local languages, Soviet ideology was "nativized" by conveying its messages through local cultural media' (2005: 39). See also Martin: '*korenizatsiia* was a prophylactic policy designed to defuse and prevent the development of genuine nationalism among the formerly oppressed non-Russian colonial peoples through the provision of national territories, languages, elites, and cultures' (2001: 126).

delicate issue, since resorting to violence was doomed to fail<sup>87</sup>: ‘Violence was much less effective if one’s task was to make people brush their teeth, use underwear, read books, and boil the meat they ate’. As an example, Slezkine highlights hygiene contests, which were organized to encourage local people, especially women, to pay closer attention to their hygiene, among other areas of everyday life, the winners of which were awarded prizes (Slezkine 1994a: 231).

Thus, the discourse of *kultur’nost* became the slogan for the civilizing missions that were to be carried out by the socialist state institutions. It was heavily loaded with aspirations to create a new Soviet man with a socialist morality whose understanding of hygiene, leisure time activities, work habits and civilized behaviour would give way not only to a sense of self-fulfilment, but also the fulfilment of building the ideal socialism. Once the masses had obtained enlightenment and distanced themselves from their old customs and backward practices, moving on to ‘embrace socialist values and join the collective, Stalinism offered a means of self-fulfillment – a means of escaping the competition and alienation of the capitalist system, of participating in the world-historical task of building socialism, and of discovering and cultivating the best qualities within themselves’ (Hoffmann 2003: 53).

However, what happens when the norms and values promoted by modernizers are completely alien, and in some cases diametrically opposed, to those of the modernized? The transformation of everyday life through the promotion of *kultur’nost* meant the education of the backward masses, and it was envisaged that the pastoral and nomadic social life of the Kyrgyz had to be transformed by the ideals of the revolution. The Russian concept of *kultur’nost* or culturedness can be directly translated into Kyrgyz as *madaniyattuu*; however, for the nomadic Kyrgyz a more culturally grounded translation of culturedness would be ‘observing the traditions’ (*salty karmoo*). Even today among rural Kyrgyz, assessing behaviour, for instance, is made with reference to *salt* or ‘tradition’, there being a strong relationship between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘morally acceptable’.<sup>88</sup> If the party pronouncements and guidelines defined culturedness as a code of behaviour and Soviet etiquette, for rural Kyrgyz the observance of traditions provided the basis of nomadic etiquette.

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<sup>87</sup> Fitzpatrick argues that the party leadership in the early NEP era had a developmental approach to culture: ‘Lenin had rejected the idea that cultural power, like political power, could be seized by revolutionary action. Culture, in his view, had to be patiently acquired and assimilated’ (1992: 115).

<sup>88</sup> For a broader discussion of the Kyrgyz concept of *salt*, see Beyer (2016).

The task of raising the ‘cultural’ level of the nomads was as urgent as the implementation of the policies of sedentarization and collectivization. While certain traditional practices such as polygamy and bride-capture were made ‘illegal’<sup>89</sup>, the cultivation of socialist morality in the everyday life of every individual was deemed necessary in order to destroy feudal and other backward survivals from the pre-revolutionary era. As the revolutionary vanguard had to plan enlightenment activities to overcome the observance of traditions, they needed ‘local allies’ among the rural Kyrgyz. As I demonstrate in the next section, among the local allies who were readily available for such purposes were the local tradition-bearers, the master oral poets of the Kyrgyz.

### ***‘Proletarian culture’, socialist realism and the rise of folklore***

Felix Oinas (1973, 1975) designates the first decade of the revolution as the ‘golden age’ of folklore due to the party and government’s relatively low level of supervision of the production, collection and study of folklore materials. Yet, there were still contradictory voices within the party suggesting that folklore was anything but innocent: ‘The belief that folklore reflected the ideology of the ruling classes gave rise to a strongly negative attitude toward it in literary circles in the 1920s. The so-called *Proletcul’t*<sup>90</sup> declared that folklore was hostile to Soviet people, because it reflected the *kulak* ideology’ (Oinas 1975: 157). These ideas were based on popular folk tales that glorified corrupt feudal rulers, and, where children were concerned, instigated in them ‘sickly fantasies’, a ‘*kulak* attitude’ and ‘bourgeois ideals’.

The relative freedom of folklore, as well as critical voices against it, came to an end in the late 1920s, around the time when the ‘cultural revolution’ within the party was being fought: ‘Literature, under the dictatorship of RAPP<sup>91</sup>, was now “put in uniform” and was enlisted in the service of the first five-year plan’ (Oinas 1973: 46). Now, more than before, the party was interested in the activities of folk artists and folklorists, since folklore was recognized as an important component in the formation of a socialist culture. However, the decisive moment in the fate of folklore across the Soviet Union came in 1934, when Maxim Gorky, the head of the Union

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<sup>89</sup> Martin (1997) explores a similar theme of making the traditional illegal among the Kazakhs. Slezkine (1992) discusses the criminalization of the blood feud and traditional family organization that perpetuated gender inequality through the practices of bridewealth and polygamy among the inhabitants of the Arctic and sub-Arctic zones of the Soviet Union.

<sup>90</sup> Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations (1917-1932).

<sup>91</sup> The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers was established in 1925 and disbanded in 1932, to be replaced by the USSR Union of Writers, or more briefly the Union of Soviet Writers, founded the same year.

of Soviet Writers, gave an impressive speech at the first Congress of the Writers' Union that focused on the relations between folklore and labour, stressing three main points: 'the close connection of folklore to the concrete life and working conditions of the people; life optimism of folklore, which expresses the deepest moral and human aspirations of the masses and can have validity as the source of world outlook of a people; and the high artistic value of folklore' (Oinas 1973: 46-47). During the Congress, which was also attended by Stalin, Gorky championed 'socialist realism' as the new paradigm that had to be observed in all artistic works, from literature to stage performances, painting, music, etc. The party leadership was convinced that folklore, if fused with socialist realist themes, could be an important tool in the advancement of socialism.<sup>92</sup> The party supported large-scale collecting activities, which were made obligatory for ethnographic organizations: 'The local intelligentsia, university students, and students of trade schools were mobilized for active collecting' (Oinas 1973: 47).<sup>93</sup> Thus, the promotion of a 'proletarian culture' in the late 1920s coincided with the increasing role that was assigned to folklore in the new socialist society, a process that was complemented by the creation of socialist realism as an artistic and literary movement across the Soviet Union. These major political and cultural processes within the party leadership determined the course that the cultural revolution would take in the years to come. Enlightenment activities directed towards lifting the cultural level of the masses were extended to include socialist-realist artistic productions and literary works, including folklore, which developed into an ideal tool for promoting proletarian culture among rural populations.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Kyrgyz oral poets were the traditional intellectuals of their communities due to their vast knowledge of oral traditions; hence, tribal leaders sought their alliance in order to spread the legitimacy of their rule among local populations.<sup>94</sup> In what follows, I

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<sup>92</sup> In fact, this historical development resonates with the rise of folklore in the West as well. While the methods and goals were different, *Volkskunde* was similarly instrumentalized by nineteenth-century nationalists in Europe.

<sup>93</sup> This was an all-Union practice and was not confined to the early years of the Soviet era. A Kyrgyz folklorist pointed to these activities as a precondition for enriching Kyrgyz literature even in the last decades of the era: 'We need to pay attention to the task of collecting the oral traditions which bear moral lessons. In our age, every literate person can do this, and it is not a difficult task ... Our literature will thrive when everybody writes down the words and songs that are popular among the people on a paper and sends them in. It is the major task of our men of letters to compile and spread them' (Ümötaliyev 1979: 12).

<sup>94</sup> Compare this to Goody's comments on Parry's work on the Yugoslav epic tradition: 'The singing of epics was a low vernacular activity contrasting with the high activities of church and state. Politics and religion were the subject of dominant literature influences, leaving "popular culture" in the quasi-oral sphere of activity until it caught the attention of nineteenth-

argue that the use of oral poetry to spread political legitimacy continued in the Soviet era as oral poets and their performances became ideal party instruments in disseminating the norms and values of a socialist 'culture' and revolutionizing the Soviet peripheries through 'culture'.

### ***Oral Poets as Local Allies of the Cultural Revolution among the Kyrgyz***

One of the central claims of this chapter is that Kyrgyz oral poetry performances were quite different in both form and content from the more popular genres of folklore that the party officials and state institutions were promoting in various parts of the Soviet Union. This could be put down to four specific reasons. First, occupying the highest rank among performers of oral traditions, an oral poet could only be called a *tökmö akyn* if he could establish his mastery of oral traditional genres, and more significantly his ability to improvise oral poetry. Second, while improvising, oral poets had to sing on a contemporary topic which they blended with proverbs and aphorisms that were already established in the collective memory of the Kyrgyz, thus creating a new, dynamic quality to their oral poetic performances. Third, the topic of improvised performances could cover anything from singing moral messages and social-political criticisms to delivering the messages of tribal leaders, etc. Finally, momentary improvisation had become a highly respected skill among the Kyrgyz, since the fact that performances did not feature a canonized text or a well-known folk song or tale added a spiritual aspect to such performances.<sup>95</sup> Thus, for the Kyrgyz, *tökmö akynchylık* had never been folklore per se; rather, it was a social-cultural institution, a traditional medium of communication in which oral poets delivered messages from the 'ancestors' or the regional elites, or simply conveyed the news from different regions.

For the party, the prominent task was to (re-)invent these extant cultural performances as a socialist institution in order to carry out the cultural revolution, with enlightenment activities designed to transform the *byt*.<sup>96</sup> Oral poetry performances were now to be upheld as an ideal example

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century nationalists' (Goody 1999: 93). Similarly, Parry stated that 'unlettered culture in Yugoslavia has been a rural one, one might almost say [a] backwoods phenomenon, existing alongside a literary urban culture' (1966: 212).

<sup>95</sup> I came across many similar comments during my fieldwork. Typical expressions the Kyrgyz use to refer to an oral poet's improvisation include 'God gives them revelations' and 'God reveals their lines to them' (*Kudai alarga ayan beret*).

<sup>96</sup> This policy was in line with Lenin's famous formulation of the ideal proletarian culture in a socialist society: 'Not the invention of a new proletarian culture, but the development of the best models, traditions and results of the existing culture, from the point of view of the

of proletarian culture. Moreover, since the traditional 'court' was dismissed as feudal, oral poets could now join the class war against the *kulaks* and the regional elites. In fact, there was one more factor that turned Kyrgyz oral poets into promising allies of the cultural revolution: while all these political processes taking place among the party cadres regarding the utility of the best examples of extant cultural resources coincided with the intimate place of oral poetry performances among the Kyrgyz, the pre-revolutionary history of this institution made it even more appealing. As discussed in Chapter 2, the hardships Toktogul suffered at the hands of imperial officials and regional elites, including his seven-year exile in the labour camps, and his works welcoming the Revolution could be promoted to recruit poets as cultural workers and get them to follow the footsteps of their master, Toktogul, and his tradition as an *akyn-demokrat*.

Kyrgyz oral poets could also continue singing moral messages about the innovations that were taking place across the country. For the party, oral poets could serve as an ideal link between centre and periphery, and could be used to reach distinctive populations where 'the revolutionary vanguard had the least foothold'. These traditional channels of communication would serve as a template through which the norms and values attached to *kultur'nost* could be disseminated among the rural Kyrgyz. As early as the second decade of the revolution, oral poetry performances were transformed into enlightenment institutions and the oral poets into 'cultural workers'. The 'voice of the ancestors' had to be converted into the poets of socialism.

The party's employment of Kyrgyz oral poets dates back to the earliest days of Soviet arrival in the region. In the earliest years of the revolution, the traditional authority of these traditional intellectuals was channelled into local administrative posts. Many oral poets worked as heads of village soviets, artists in regional theatres, administrators in houses of culture and chairmen of *kolkhozes*. Influential poets such as Kalyk Akiyev (1883-1953) and Osmonkul Bölöbalayev (1888-1967) were sent by the party during the national-territorial delimitation of northern Turkestan into the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Republics as envoys to local populations to deliver the centre's message (Toktobekov 2010: 29). During collectivization campaigns, Kalyk was sent as an emissary to his own people in the Naryn region, where the local population, initially opposed to the collectivization of their land and animals, could only be persuaded to accept it through his intervention.<sup>97</sup>

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Marxist world outlook and the conditions of life and struggle of the proletariat in the period of its dictatorship' (Lenin 1972: 217).

<sup>97</sup> This account was published in 1979 in *Kyrgyzstan Madaniyaty* under the title 'The Heritage of Kalyk'. Even if one considers this story unconvincing, the fact that such an



Plate 5. Poets Estebes Tursunaliyev (front left) and Toktosun Tynybekov (front right) performing at a party congress.

Many oral poets were invited to regional and national meetings with party officials, as well as meetings of local administrators. As community leaders, Kalyk and Osmonkul were invited to the Kyrgyz SSR parliament's first session as a delegation in 1936 (Tokombaev 1972: 135). Poets Toktanaaly Shabdanbayev (1896-1978) and Ismail Borochiyev (1910-1978) attended the first Congress of Collective Farmers in 1944 (Tokombaev 1972: 202). Oral poets were present at these meetings as delegates from their regions. Their performances also became part of these events, as well as those of regional festivals and other political events.

The remaining sections of this chapter will demonstrate the entangling of traditional elements and modern socialist institutions in order to explore the intricacies of Soviet-style modernization in the region. Relying on archival sources, newspapers, memoirs and biographical works, I will attempt to provide an alternative account of the modernizing encounter between the Soviet state and the peoples of Central Asia, focusing on how

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account of an oral poet was published in a journal is significant in itself for what it suggests: oral poets were advertised as endorsing the collectivization of land among other socialist projects. This account is discussed further in Chapter 4.



this encounter informed the course of the cultural revolution in the peripheries. The history of Soviet involvement with oral poetry performances can best be explained as part of the strategy of the Soviet state to legitimize itself constantly<sup>98</sup> and to transform the everyday lives of local populations. This process of the creation and maintenance of social legitimation could not have been as successful without the effective utilization of existing cultural resources, that is, the traditional authority of oral poets and their poetry performances in the case of rural Kyrgyz.

## **Institutionalization of Oral Poetry under Philharmonics**

### ***The Making of a Soviet Poet: Orality, Literacy and Ideology***

It should be stated from the outset that the image of an improvising oral poet did not fit into the rigidly defined categories of ideal arts in modern Soviet society, the major reason being that improvisation was seen as a low form of art associated with a nomadic, backward form of social organization when compared to a sedentary community with literary traditions.<sup>99</sup> The building of a socialist culture could not be achieved through channels such as oral poetry performances due to the fleeting nature of improvisation, which stood in stark contrast to the fixity of a text. In addition to being a low form of art, improvisation posed a more serious problem: while all artistic and literary works had to be checked for their ideological appropriateness, the improvisatory nature of these performances did not permit their censorship. In line with the official policies of promoting proletarian culture in a socialist realist mould, every line of poetry in these performances had to address the lives and works of workers and peasants. In the same vein, for the party officials, improvisation meant uncertainty, an element that could not be tolerated and was therefore suppressed, so that these cultural performances served instead to direct the transformation of the everyday lives of rural Kyrgyz.

Before oral poets could be promoted and mass-sponsored by the party, therefore, the method of composition associated with their performances had to be reworked to suit the new socialist society. This was achieved by making oral poets write down their poetry first and submit it for approval to the necessary authority before they were allowed to perform it on stage. The earliest surviving party documents suggest that oral poets stopped improvising on stage as early as 1936, the year they started working

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<sup>98</sup> Unlike the postsocialist state, which, if not explicitly, declares its legitimacy by the sheer collapse of the former order. This theme will be further explored in Chapter 6.

<sup>99</sup> See Goody (1999, 2005) for a lengthy discussion of orality and literacy in traditional societies.

systematically as cultural workers. While all Soviet-era party documents and scholarly sources refer to Kyrgyz oral poets as *akyn-improvisator* or *pevets-improvizator* to differentiate them from other culture workers and written poets, ironically they were forbidden to improvise a line of poetry on stage from the very start.

In line with this measure, all the oral poets who became cultural workers had to learn how to read and write. This was not only important in encouraging them to write down their poetry and publish their work in the long run: they were also expected to be a good example for the broader public in themselves calling for the ending of illiteracy on stage.



Plate 6. Poets and their political mentor.

Moreover, they had to be literate for bureaucratic reasons: when they travelled together across the country, they had to file written reports on their performances, on attendance at their concerts by the local population and on any problems which had occurred during their trips. While many of them took literacy classes provided at the State Philharmonics, those who were literate were made members of the Writers' Union. While on the one hand their poetry books were compiled and published by the state in the early 1930s, they also started publishing their own poetry books, as well as biographies written in prose in which they denounced the pre-revolutionary era and the fact that they had had to sing in the courts of feudal leaders or for the *kulaks*.

The anthropological implications of this change from orality to literacy are significant in making sense of the full scope of the socialist modernization project that was underway. While relying on local social institutions as viable means of communicating with the masses in the periphery and making alliances with the oral poets and what their works stood for, namely the voice of the ancestors, not only was the content of the performances altered completely, the performers themselves also had to be modernized. Thus, the move from orality to literacy in the context of these performances reflected the broader socialist vision of a modern society: the strong interest of local populations in their oral traditions was itself a reflection of the backwardness of Kyrgyz society. These oral traditions could be reinvented as a socialist phenomenon and sponsored as long as the interest in them was kept alive. A teleological view of the socialist modernization project implied that, as literacy rates increased rapidly among both rural and urban populations, oral traditions would lose their popularity among the masses. Kyrgyz oral poets started producing written poetry as early as the 1940s; their pieces were first published in newspapers and then later collected in poetry books. At the same time, oral poetry ensembles were sponsored until the last decade of the socialist era, regardless of the initial assumptions.

While literacy was a precondition for the employment of oral poets as cultural workers, the party's expectations of these 'local allies' were much higher. Party officials were clearly aware that their management of the script and themes of the poets' performances and of the latter publishing their works in written form would not be influential enough for ideological purposes. Oral poets had to be trained in modern music as well as ideology to turn their performances into prime examples of proletarian culture fused with socialist realist themes. Their performances had to raise the cultural level of the masses and inspire hard work in the spirit of socialist competition. Thus, several years after poets started working under the Philharmonics (see next section), they were all required to attend seminars on literary theory and political ideology. A report from the director of the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics' Art Department summarizing the activities of an in-house training for the advancement of artists' qualifications reads as follows:

Ensemble of national poets: Osmonkul Bölöbalayev, Chalagyz Isabayev, Moldobasan Musulmankulov and Kalyk Akiyev, among others, were trained in literature seminars by Joomart Bokombaev in the months of December and January of this year. Moreover,

lectures in political themes were also organized especially for this group.<sup>100</sup>

These seminars were deemed necessary so that the oral poets, who were also seen as traditional orators, would be well-versed in the language of socialism. Initially, it was not so easy for the oral poets to adopt this language. Some years after this initial report, another party document emphasized the importance of the language of oral poetry performances, noted that ‘no measures are taken to improve the qualifications of the oral poets’ and recommended that more recent literature be used to improve the oral poets’ ideological training.<sup>101</sup> The party officials’ insistence on such training could be explained with reference to their interest in turning oral poets into ‘organic intellectuals’ in the Gramscian sense. Gramsci coined this term to refer to influential people who support the masses in their fight against hegemonic powers.<sup>102</sup> Party officials similarly believed that, once the cultural level of the masses had been raised, the latter would join the struggle for the establishment of a classless society, it being the duty of the oral poets to instil such awareness on the road to building socialism (Igmen 2004: 101).

### ***The Ensembles***

Effective and systematic employment of Kyrgyz oral poets and extensive utilization of their performances began with the foundation of the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics in 1936, the year Kyrgyzstan became a fully fledged socialist republic. A separate department under the name of ‘national poets’ was established at the Philharmonics consisting of from five to seven ensembles at different times, each ensemble being made up of four to eight oral poets. Moreover, other than performing oral poetry, many of the poets had appointments in other departments such as the ‘ensemble of national instruments’. Archival sources reveal that ensembles of poets started touring the country as early as the year the Philharmonics was founded.<sup>103</sup> Each ensemble toured the country throughout the year to perform *kulturnaya obslujvaniya*, or ‘cultural service’. While collective and state farms were the most regularly visited as part of concert plans, the ensembles also held concerts for industrial and construction workers, students, and soldiers and veterans.

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<sup>100</sup> ‘To the Administrations of All Arts Departments’, 23 February 1942. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 9, d. 5, p. 70.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Resolution No. 65’. May 1948. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 10, d. 105, p. 309.

<sup>102</sup> See Gottlieb (1989: 113-119) for Gramsci’s typology of intellectuals.

<sup>103</sup> Regional Committee of Cultural Enlightenment. 4 January 1937. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 9, p. 43. The document refers to a performance held at a house of culture in December 1936.

The basic information found in the documents relating to poetry ensembles gives the names of the poets involved in the ensemble, at which particular farms the ensemble organized a concert, the length of time they stayed in the regions and the approximate number of concerts poets held within the assigned period. Some documents emphasize the central themes of these poetry performances in each ensemble. While the head of the ensemble was responsible for the artistic quality of the concert, each concert also had a director and/ or a secretary responsible for the political appropriateness of the performances. As soon as the ensemble returned to Frunze from their travels, a detailed report of the trip was submitted to the head of the Philharmonics.

Some documents also suggest that the heads of certain collective farms or the administration of houses of culture wrote a separate report to the Philharmonics in the form of feedback, mostly to demonstrate the locals' appreciation of the poetry performances of the ensembles visiting their region.<sup>104</sup> If the quality of performances was extraordinary, the Ministry of Culture would congratulate the oral poets and make them a separate monetary reward:

The number of concerts exceeded the initial plan: 109 concerts were held instead of 73. These cultural works brought forward the best and most fruitful results... In appreciation of extraordinary work to fulfil the plan in the best means possible, national artists Musulmankulov, Karamoldo Orozov, the soloists of the ensemble Alymkul Üsönbayev, Kalyk Akiyev, Musa Bayetov, Atai Ogombayev, Ismail Boronchiyev, Ibrai Tumanov, Toktosun Tynybekov for their exemplary behaviour and good manners, good command of theory of music and sticking to the financial plan, shall be given a monetary award.<sup>105</sup>

In the personal file of Musa Bayetov (1902-1949), the hard work of these poets is praised:

During the war years, Musa Bayetov and other artists travelled to the front in order to encourage and cheer the soldiers. The masters of Kyrgyz national culture founded seven ensembles particularly for the front and travelled to Kalinin, Belarus, Leningrad and Ukraine to give concerts. Musa, among other artists, performed at more than 2500 concerts.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> 'A letter to the administration of the Philharmonics and comrade Shudin', 15 May 1942. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 15, p. 264.

<sup>105</sup> 'Resolution on Kyrgyz State Philharmonics', 16 August 1938. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 4, pp. 174-175.

<sup>106</sup> 'Musa Baetov', personal file of Musa Baetov, December 1977. TsGAKR f. 2753, op. 1.

Oral poets were usually given one or two weeks holiday after their return from a tiring trip to the regions. Elderly poets were often sent to *kurorts* or spa resorts for vacations.<sup>107</sup>



Plate 7. Ensembles at work. Estes Tursunaliyev performing to the locals.

The ensembles had various agendas: for example, sometimes the details of a five-year plan had to be disseminated, sometimes they emphasised the innovations which the revolution had brought about, and sometimes the theme of their performances was ‘backward practices’, such as brideprice, underage marriage and illiteracy, which may have been endemic in a particular region. The administration of the Philharmonics alone decided which ensemble would go to which region, for how long it would stay and how many concerts it would perform. On average, an ensemble travelled to a region for five to ten weeks and put on between forty to ninety performances for various audiences in that region. Usually, the ensemble prepared the concert program and submitted it for approval at least one week prior to its departure. Each ensemble was usually accompanied by a secretary, whose

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Resolution No. 68’, 16 April 1941. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 20, p. 83.

main role was to scrutinize every single performance for its ideological appropriateness.

Documentation of the trips to the regions reveal that from the mid-1930s until the 1970s the poets criss-crossed the country and met different sectors of the population. The concert plans for 1951 best exemplify the mobility of the poets across the country and the outstanding work they were expected to fulfil. One ensemble was scheduled to travel to Jalalabad province between March 1st and April 5th with an approximate plan for 60 to 75 concerts in these five weeks. After a break of eight days, the same ensemble continued to Jalalabad province from April 13th to May 24th to hold concerts for farmers planting for the spring. From there, they moved to Tian-Shan province and held performances from May 26th until October 14th. An ensemble such as this would be travelling across the country for eight to ten months of the year.<sup>108</sup> Another document dated 1967 summarizes the itinerary of two ensembles as follows: April 1st to June 16th in Osh province; July 1st to September 1st in Tian-Shan province; October 1st to October 30th in Chui province; and November 10th to December 20th in Jalalabad province.<sup>109</sup> It is clear from these documents that, regardless of the radical changes in the political atmosphere and the years of WWII in between, the effective use of oral poets as part of the agenda of the cultural revolution continued at the same pace from the 1930s until the 1970s.

The ensembles' hectic schedules provoked some complaints from the oral poets. A 1960 document detailing the minutes of a meeting with the employees of the Philharmonics gave voice to the poet Toktosun Tynybekov (1927-1982):

We, the soloist of Kyrgyz ensembles, always fulfil the plans that are given to us... However, such problems occur, for instance, when we were in Talas, local ensembles who worked in parallel with us performed with our repertoire and this was an impediment to the success of our performances. Moreover, during a *kommandirovka* [concert trip] the local party committee gave presents to the children of workers, but nothing was given to our children – we were not even informed of this.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> 'An approximate Concert Plan', 1951. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 37, pp. 92-97.

<sup>109</sup> 'Work Plan of Philharmonics Collective', 1967. TsGAKR f. 2582, op. 1, d. 518, p. 84.

<sup>110</sup> The families of the poets did not attend the concert trips. Here, the poet uses the discourse of 'equality' to complain about unfair treatment: poets were also 'workers', if of a different kind, and if their worker-audience received presents for their kids, oral poets also should.

In the same meeting<sup>111</sup>, Ismail Boronchiyev grumbled about working conditions:

Before, we used to hold thirteen performances as a norm, but now this number has gone up to nineteen.<sup>112</sup> Even in the past we had to travel too often, now it seems we will never see our families. Why has the condition of soloists become so? We never rest in summer, and we are allowed to have our vacations only in the winter. I implore your help for the improvement of this situation.<sup>113</sup>

Although the archival documents state that the oral poets were working under rather difficult circumstances, it is also evident they were receiving handsome payments in return for their efforts. Their monthly remuneration was relatively high in comparison to the salaries of other artists or even civil servants. A 1942 payroll listing the salaries of various 'soloists and musicians of the Philharmonics' lists oral poets as the highest paid group of artists.<sup>114</sup> While the salaries of other artists ranged from 250 to 700 roubles, in 1942 five oral poets<sup>115</sup> were listed as the highest paid employees of the Philharmonics, with monthly salaries of 1300 roubles.<sup>116</sup> The professional résumés of two oral poets, Estebe Tursunaliyev and Toktosun Tynybekov, aged 26 and 31 at the time, state among other things that in March 1959 their monthly salaries were raised from 1200 to 1500 roubles.<sup>117</sup> These salaries did not include an additional payment of 100 roubles per performance if oral poets were invited to perform for special occasions, such as the opening of the Congress of Livestock Farmers, which would not be stated in their monthly concert plans.

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<sup>111</sup> 'Meeting of Kyrgyz State Philharmonics' Employees', 20 December 1960. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 67, p. 194.

<sup>112</sup> It is not clear from this document whether 'the norm' refers to the number of performances per month or per trip. Regardless, it can be inferred that these figures refer to the performances of a single poet, rather than the total number of performances of the ensembles as a whole.

<sup>113</sup> 'Meeting of Kyrgyz State Philharmonics' Employees', 20 December 1960. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 67, p. 195.

<sup>114</sup> 'Resolution No. 225 on Kyrgyz State Philharmonics named after Toktogul Satylganov', 23 November 1942. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 23, p. 237.

<sup>115</sup> The five oral poets were Musa Baetov, Osmonkul Bölöbalayev, Moldobasan Muslumankulov, Atai Ogombayev and Ibrai Tumanov.

<sup>116</sup> Various sources suggest that the average salary in 1940s in Kyrgyz SSR was between 400 and 450 roubles.

<sup>117</sup> 'Professional Resume', 11 March 1959. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 58, pp. 43-44. The average salary at the time was between 700 and 800 roubles.





Plate 8. Poet Kalyk Akiyev (center) with his children, Moscow 1939.

### ***Reconstructing the Past on the Model of the Socialist Present***

In addition to their work in ensembles, oral poets were extremely busy going over and sorting out an immense body of oral traditions, their collection, canonization and finally the creation of their texts, to be disseminated through the available media. Among the oral poets, Toktogul Satylganov, Togolok Moldo, Korgol Dosuyev, Kalyk Akiyev, Osmonkul Bölöbalayev and Alymkul Üsönbayev were those who worked most extensively with party officials to filter the oral traditions. In 1928 A.V. Zataevich, one of the leading ethnographers of Central Asian folklore, met Toktogul Satylganov in Frunze to write down his versions of various melodies, which he published in 1934 (Zataevich 1934). Similarly, in 1940 another famous folklorist at this time, V.S. Vinogradov, met with Korgol Dosuyev in Frunze to record his versions of legends and melodies (Ömürkanov 2013: 20). Other than these two records<sup>118</sup>, the remaining poets worked on a long-term project during their employment at the Philharmonics to canonize the oral traditions of the Kyrgyz, a process supervised by the Administration of Arts under the Ministry of Culture. At meetings entitled 'Listening to and Evaluating

<sup>118</sup> As explained in Chapter 2, regardless of his mastery of oral traditions, Toktogul Satylganov was not often approached by ethnographers, folklorists and musicologists for the political reasons I have mentioned. His heritage was transmitted through the other oral poets listed above.

Kyrgyz Musical Works', the Administration of Arts met regularly from 1937 onwards to go through a rich body of oral traditions and decide which of these works should be incorporated into the oral-traditional heritage of the Kyrgyz SSR.<sup>119</sup> While some works were prohibited altogether, others were either reworked by the poets partially or completely before they were disseminated and possibly translated into Russian, or only their titles were changed to observe political correctness. A typical remark for a piece of work admitted into the poets' repertoire was, 'It shall be accepted for the contemporaneity of its theme'.<sup>120</sup>

It was not only the pre-revolutionary oral traditions that were censored. Periodic meetings were held at the Ministry of Culture, where earlier works produced in the Soviet era were also consistently checked to make sure that all songs and melodies previously promoted were still in conformity with the ideology of the present day.<sup>121</sup> There were multiple reasons for the exclusion of certain oral traditions from the repertoire of Kyrgyz arts. One protocol dated 1938 reveals the work of the Repertoire Committee of the Administration of Arts under the Ministry of Culture, where detailed accounts are given as to why certain works produced between 1934 and 1936 should be eliminated from all future performances:

#4134 '*Küydüm Chok*' [Burning Embers], text and melody are Atai Ogonbaev's. The text of the song has words and phrases which are in contradiction with the ideology. Its performance shall be prohibited, and its text shall be reworked.

#4157 '*Syngan Bugu*' [Perished Bugu], text is Karamoldo Orozov's. Its performance is allowed, but it should be renamed 'Kambarkan'.

#322 '*Akhmatbektin Obonu*' [Akhmatbek's Melody]. Text is Musa Bayetov's, melody is anonymous: its performance shall be prohibited; the name Akhmatbek, who is an enemy of the people, must be removed and the text shall be reworked.

#332 '*Staraya Pechal Pastuha*' [Grief of the Old Shepherd]. Text is Osmonkul's, an enemy of the people. Its performance shall be prohibited; its text and melody shall be destroyed altogether.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Protocol No. 1, 'Meeting on Listening to and Evaluating Kyrgyz Musical Works', 23 June 1937. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 5, d. 1, p. 85.

<sup>120</sup> Protocol No. 28, 'Meeting of Department of Repertoire Redaction under Ministry of Culture', 1972. TsGAKR f. 2582, op. 1, d. 620, p. 21.

<sup>121</sup> See also Oinas (1973, 1975) and Miller (1990) for the paradoxical circumstances in which Soviet folklorists found themselves when they had to denounce their earlier research when later it was considered politically incorrect.

<sup>122</sup> 'Assessment of the Kyrgyz Gramophone Record Created between 1934-1936', 14 July 1938. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 4, d. 2, p. 14.

At times, the ideological drive behind these assessments was rather ironical. For instance, 'Bugu' is the name of a northern Kyrgyz tribe. 'Perished Bugu' is a love song that describes a young man from a different tribe who marries a young woman from the Bugu tribe without her parents' consent. Subsequently, after giving birth to their first child, the mother passes away. Although this is an individual tragedy, officials at the Ministry of Culture decided to rename the song so that it did not implicitly refer to a tribe by name. In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, this song is still popular and is known by its prohibited name, '*Syngan Bugu – Kambarkan*'. Another song, 'The Grief of the Old Shepherd' written by the oral poet Osmonkul, is also reflective of the major ideological measures taken against dissent. This song was repeatedly performed until 1937, when the oral poet Osmonkul was labelled a counter-revolutionary; subsequently, his works were also banned from the repertoire. It was not until 1939 that Osmonkul's reputation was restored, and his song was permitted to be performed a year after being banned. The case of Osmonkul will be revisited later in this chapter.

Through such processes, Kyrgyz oral poetry was institutionalized around the end of 1930s. These skilful improvisers and virtuosi of vast oral traditions, who represented the voice of the ancestors for the rural Kyrgyz, started improvising in support of socialism on stage. While oral poets were attractive to the state because of their prestige among the Kyrgyz, as soon as the state started employing oral poets to promote socialism, the latter ceased to be able to sing these oral traditions, nor were they allowed to improvise, at least officially.<sup>123</sup> Regardless of the fact that all their on-stage performances were scripted and scrutinized for political correctness and approved with or without reservation in advance, both the Kyrgyz people and the party officials continued to refer to them as 'oral' poets and their work as 'improvisation'.

### ***Slippery Performances***

Archival documents illustrate the precarious situation oral poets found themselves in while 'improvising' socialism on stage. A report from the regional committee of cultural enlightenment published a statement on the performances of two oral poets, Osmonkul Bölöbalayev and Sharshen Termechikov, pointing to their choice of certain words and phrases during

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<sup>123</sup> Oral poets' unofficial performances off the socialist stage are the topic of the following chapter.

their performances at a concert and criticizing them as politically and ideologically incorrect<sup>124</sup>:

Sharshen was telling the story of '*Okhotnik*' [Hunter], and he uttered the sentences below: 'As I came back home from hunting, there were a few men outside the gate of my house. They were worse than an infidel [*kafir*] since they said "Sharshen did not kill a goat but a jackdaw"'. The word *kafir* refers to a person who does not believe in God. It means a bad, immoral person. [Poet's story continued] 'Among them, there were also believers [*iymanduu*] who said "Sharshen actually killed migratory birds"'. The word *iymanduu* refers to the people who believe in God, and it means a good and conscionable person.

The '*Okhotnik*' story was removed from the repertoire until it was corrected. Moreover, for bringing into his performance words that were not politically correct, Sharshen lost his job. After confessing to his mistake, he returned to his employment with the Philharmonics a year later, in January 1938, at a monthly salary of 630 roubles.<sup>125</sup>

Osmonkul was accused of making a wrong choice of tenses while singing a piece of poetry which was not originally in the concert program, and this mistake could not be tolerated:

In his song '*Kurulush*' [Construction], which was not in the concert repertoire, Osmonkul said the following: 'with our hands clasped tightly together, the party is getting stronger' [*ukrepleniya*], as he was singing about the improvements that have taken place [since the revolution]; instead, he should have said 'got stronger' [*ukrepilas*]. Osmonkul denies having said this, and others also confirm that this phrase was not uttered by Osmonkul.

As a result, Osmonkul was punished, though it was not clear in what way, and the concert's supervisor was also reprimanded for having allowed this incident to occur. In the same year, Osmonkul was condemned as an 'enemy of the people' due to his 'anti-Soviet performances' and his relationship with a counter-revolutionary.<sup>126</sup> Another document in 1938 also refers to him as 'the enemy of the people'.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>124</sup> 'Report from Regional Committee of Enlightenment', 04 January 1937. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 9, p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> Resolution No. 3, 10 January 1938. TsGAKR f. 1687, op. 1, d. 4, p. 7.

<sup>126</sup> 'Resolution of the Department of Art under Council of Peoples Commissariat of Kyrgyz SSR', 17 June 1937. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 9, p. 82.

<sup>127</sup> 'Protocol on Revision of Kyrgyz Gramophone Recording Prepared between 1934-1936', 12 May 1938. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 4, d. 2, p. 14.

We should bear in mind that this particular period is that of the Stalinist purges; all these poets returned to their jobs a couple of years later. The precariousness of their positions stemmed from the symbolic as well as the literal influence of their performances. Thus, official acknowledgement of their traditional authority not only meant that they were accorded prestige and benefits, but also that they posed a potential threat. Osmonkul's status and position improved, but neither the archival sources nor contemporary scholarly works shed light on what really happened to him between 1937 and 1940. He became a member of the Writers' Union in 1940 and was given the status of state artist of the Kyrgyz SSR in 1942 (other poets of similar status received this promotion three years earlier, in 1939). His name reappears in the archival documents in 1942 among those poets who should be trained in political themes and literary theory.<sup>128</sup> His efforts during the war years were highly appreciated, his seventieth birthday was celebrated with a festival, and a street in Frunze was named after him, as well as a *kolkhoz* in the Issyk-Ata region.<sup>129</sup>

Oral poetry performances were indeed slippery, since oral poets did not need any means or occasions to sing; they could improvise spontaneously or could recite from their vast repertoire of oral traditions. Even a stage was not needed; the only prerequisite for a performance was a small audience and a *komuz* (their usual stringed instrument). Party officials were well aware of this fact and accordingly gave priority to the poets' ideological training, as well as offering them suitable conditions and benefits so that they only sang about the high qualities of the new Soviet person and denounce backwardness and feudal survivals.

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<sup>128</sup> 'Report on Activities Completed to Improve the Qualifications of Artist Working at Kyrgyz State Philharmonics', 23 February 1942. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 9, d. 5, p. 163.

<sup>129</sup> Protocol No. 101, 'On Upholding the Memory of State Artist of Kyrgyz SSR Osmonkul Bölöbalayev', 13 February 1969. TsGAPDKR f. 56, op. 4, d. 183, p. 32.



Plate 9. Oral poets as exemplary Soviet citizens. Osmonkul Bölöbalayev casting his vote in the elections, 1954.

### **Cultivation of New Soviet Persons: ‘Cultural Service’ between the 1920s and the 1970s**

Archival sources list oral poetry ensembles as part of *obrazovatel'nykh i prosvetitel'skikh uchrezhdenii*, ‘educational and enlightenment institutions’ whose main responsibility was *kul'turnoe obsluzhivanie*, which could be roughly translated into English as (socialist) ‘cultural’ service. Through the institutionalization of oral poetry performances as a component of the greater project of the cultural revolution in building a socialist culture and the new Soviet society, oral poets, who were once traditional intellectuals of their communities, became Soviet intellectuals who had adopted the language of the party. As ‘cultural workers’ they were assigned the role of helping the party achieve a transformation in the everyday life of the Kyrgyz and the creation of the New Soviet Person. This process of collaboration between the modernizing state and local cultural resources worked effectively among the rural Kyrgyz. The following example shows the role oral poets played in the formation and maintenance of collective identities that were in line with the official discourse of creating a new Soviet identity and the construction of socialist culture.

### *Backwardness Staged*

One of the first official performances of the Soviet era took place in 1926.<sup>130</sup> A vivid description of this performance was published in 1968, four decades after the performance took place, on *Kyrgyzstan Madaniyaty*. This account retells the story of a poetry duel between the oral poets Kalyk and Osmonkul:

On an autumn day of 1926, in the city Frunze, Kyrgyz people, some of them on horseback and others on foot, started flooding into the workers' club, which was located at the intersection of Soviet and Frunze streets. Their faces were covered with expressions of excitement and joy, as if anticipating a major event that was to take place. This was because, that day, they read an announcement in the *Erkin-Too* newspaper that the remarkable Kyrgyz oral poets Kalyk and Osmonkul would hold an *aitysh* at the workers' club. The *aitysh* took place in the club, which was packed with people, inside and outside. It is clear in itself that, together with the accompaniment of *komuz*, the poetry duel of these two master oral poets would be fascinating for the people present (4 December 1968).

According to the article, the theme of this particular poetry duel was Osmonkul's recent visit to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan SSR, as part of the Kyrgyz delegation<sup>131</sup> to the first All-Soviet Turkology Congress (*Pervyi Vsesoiuznyi Tiurkologicheskii S'ezd*). This took place between February 26th and March 5th 1926 and was attended by 111 representatives of the Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union, accompanied by twenty scientific experts from the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad and Moscow, Bartold being one of them.<sup>132</sup> The major theme of the Congress was Romanization of the Arabic script in order to unify the national alphabets of the peoples of Central Asia (including Mongolia) and the Caucasus, this being part of Lenin's agenda of 'The Great Revolution in the East'.<sup>133</sup>

A closer examination of the script of the performance published in 1972 (Tokombaev 1972: 119-134) is indicative of a mixture of socialist messages delivered in a Kyrgyz mould. After Osmonkul proudly sings that

<sup>130</sup> The text of this performance was reprinted in an *aitysh* anthology (Tokombaev 1972).

<sup>131</sup> He was not only a delegate as a popular oral poet, he also performed oral poetry at the start of the Congress.

<sup>132</sup> *Pervyi Vsesoyuznyi Tiurkologicheskii Syezd*, 26 Fevralia – 5 Marta 1926. *Stenograficheskii otchet*. (First All-Union Turcological Congress, 26 February - 5 March 1926. Stenographic Report.). Baku: 'Bakinskii rabochii', 1926.

<sup>133</sup> While a change was made to the alphabet for the first time in the Azerbaijan SSR in 1924, other Central Asian socialist republics followed suit in 1927 and 1928. The Latin alphabet was used for more than a decade until 1940, when it was replaced by Cyrillic.

he was among the four delegates who were sent to Baku for the congress and that they travelled by train, Kalyk asks Osmonkul to explain what he meant by train:

Travelled by train, you just said.  
 Your words are nonsensical.  
 Do not joke  
 With your senior;  
 Say it right Osmonkul,  
 Is a train a huge camel?  
 Carrying so many people,  
 Is it a giant as in the myth?  
 You have seen a lot,  
 Though you are younger than me.  
 What is it that pulls the train,  
 Is it a horse that we all know?  
 One that gallops faster  
 Than the ones that we ride?  
 How could it, then, hold  
 Ten people on it?  
 How could the poor horse,  
 Then, pull you tirelessly?  
 Please, do not ponder, tell the truth,  
 Or, were you just lying all along?

(pp. 238-9)

Passenger trains were first introduced in the north of the Kyrgyz SSR in the early 1930s and were promoted as one of the major technological advances brought about by the October Revolution.<sup>134</sup> Bringing into his poetry metaphors well known to the Kyrgyz, like a big camel, called *jelmayan* in the region, a mythical giant and a horse, Kalyk is revealing his fascination with the idea of a passenger train to the audience. Osmonkul goes on to mention how the cars of the train were similar to a house in terms of size and comfort, forty of them being attached to each other and pulled by a locomotive, travelling through the tunnels and among the blasted mountains. Kalyk is surprised again at the idea of how a mountain can be dynamited or a road can be built through a mountain. Osmonkul goes on to explain the technology used to build the railroad. As he continues to sing about his trip, he recalls how they stopped in Tashkent and went to a circus, which he describes as a 'game' taking place inside a *boz üy* or yurt for two thousand

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<sup>134</sup> The first railway in Kyrgyzstan was built in 1908 in Kyzyl Kyia, in the south of the country, where there was a coal mine.



people where girls danced in the sky. For Kalyk, as well as for the Kyrgyz, a circus can only be understood in terms of a *toi*, a large feast, and he asks whether it was organized for a wedding or the funeral of an elite man. Kalyk keeps asking how many horses had been slaughtered for the event, whether a horse race was set up, whether the Uzbeks were as hospitable as the Kyrgyz, etc.

Following their stopover in Tashkent, Osmonkul continues to relate their trip to Baku and describes the city quite vividly, upon which Kalyk thanks him for telling him about his trip and the novelties he saw on the way and adds: 'Though you are young, how nice it is when you see these [novelties]'. During this particular stage performance, while Osmonkul represents a new, enlightened person, Kalyk plays the role of a backward local who can only comprehend these novelties in the terms and realities of traditional Kyrgyz social life. Kalyk is older than Osmonkul and thus, in accordance with the norms and values of the highly hierarchical traditional Kyrgyz society, he is supposed to know more than Osmonkul does. However, Osmonkul has been exposed to the novelties of the new era, and as an oral poet whose performances are highly regarded among the Kyrgyz, he is calling on the audience to leave aside their old ways of thinking and celebrate the new socialist era.

### ***'Bringing in' Culture***

The party's central committee issued regulations entitled 'On the Work of Cultural and Educational Institutions in Jalalabad region' in October 1940, when the provincial committee of the party in the Jalalabad region was heavily criticized for the poor conditions of cultural and educational work in the region. The report read, 'It is noticed that life on the collective farms and the culture of collective farmers lags sharply behind their prosperous economy in the region'.<sup>135</sup> The regional party committee was accused of not paying enough attention to the poor work of 'organizations aimed at strengthening the fight against feudal and class survivals and religious influences, since they did not work to raise the cultural level of the collective farmers in the villages'. Themes specifically mentioned in the regulations included marriages of underage girls, the 'sale of daughters' for a brideprice, veiling, circumcision, etc. It was further suggested that the regional party committee should 'request that the administration of the Arts Department of Ministry of Culture asks the best actors of the republic and the regional

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<sup>135</sup> 'On the work of cultural and educational institutions in Jalalabad region', 5 October 1940. TsGAPDKR f. 56, op. 4, d. 272, pp. 195-199.

theatres and artists of the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics to provide all possible assistance' to raise the cultural level of the masses generally in the region.

Historically, the observance of religious practices was more widespread in southern Kyrgyzstan, including the Fergana Valley region, than in other parts of the country, due to the fact that the influence of centres of religious scholarship in Central Asia had a significant impact on the Kyrgyz in the Osh and Jalalabad regions. In the eyes of the party officials, these rural populations were among the most backward in Kyrgyz society for their adherence to these traditional norms. Party documents further state that 'culture had to be brought in' or 'instilled in' the *kolkhozy* of these people, implying that religious observance and traditional practices were an obstacle to building a socialist culture. Party officials' employment of oral poets in this task of 'bringing in culture' to these regions was facilitated by the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics and its national poets' ensembles.

The following year, 1941, the head of the Kyrgyz State Philharmonics sent a poets' ensemble to the region for a period of two months. Already established as a tradition, oral poets Shabdanbayev and Boronchiyev travelled to two *kolkhozy* before they prepared their poetry duel. They collected information on religious and feudal practices, as well as other practices, such as the lack of general hygiene, excessive drinking, polygamy and gender inequality. They divided up the themes they would sing about between them and made up a story featuring fictional characters with unacceptable manners, quite similar to the people they had heard about among the *kolkhoz* workers. They also identified themselves as representatives of two different *kolkhozy*. Later, they performed on stage in front of a large crowd where local administrators and the heads of *kolkhozy* were also present. The performance lasted for about half an hour, during which these two poets had a poetry duel in which they criticized each other's *kolkhoz* and the manners of the certain *kolkhozniki*. The two poets concluded their performance by advising the audience that in the era of socialism they should stop their so-called backward practices. It was no accident that the oral poetry performance, staged as a dialogue by the poets Boronchiyev and Shabdanbayev, touched upon every single problematic topic mentioned in the party decree of the previous year.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> The script of the performance can be found in TsGAKR f. 1558, op. 1 though the exact year of its composition is missing. The performance was reprinted in Boronchiev and Shabdanbaev (1962: 59-70) with the title '*Chalkanga Aryz*' or 'Petition to Chalkan'.

Cleaning it all around,  
 You should shave off your beard.  
 Like giving a stroke to a hawk,  
 You should care for your beard.  
 I saw this summer,  
 In Kegeti, by the river,  
 A close relative of yours,  
 Startled by his beard.  
 Like the knees of a camel,  
 His eyes barely twinkled,  
 His ears covered by his beard.  
 Ismail, none of your relatives  
 Has any idea of hygiene.  
 I just expressed your state,  
 You have no right to dispute that. (p. 239)

A brief excerpt from the performance reveals how the poets advised the locals on their outside appearance. It comes as no surprise that the elderly are called *aksakal* or 'white beards' among the Kyrgyz. According to traditional norms, a young man cannot grow a moustache before the age of forty, nor can he grow a beard as long as his father is alive. A respectable old man will grow a beard on condition that it is neat and tidy. In the lines above, while there was no criticism of beards itself, advice was given on how it should be cared for in theatrical form.

Referring to the deeds of two brothers, one of the poets started attacking the other again:

This autumn, he and his brother  
 Held a horse race and a feast.  
 We weighed their expenses,  
 Which were equal to nine calves.  
 While doing so,  
 Their cattle plan is not met.  
 They enjoyed the feast,  
 Yet, they did not leave any calves.  
 They were *kolkhoz* animals,  
 Their papers still exist,  
 But not the calves. (p. 239)

Obviously, the contradiction here is the observance of feudal practices and their lack of fit with the obligations of the new era. Feasts and festivals, most

of which were now considered inappropriate by the party, had been rather broad categories among the nomadic Kyrgyz, and such practices also continued among the rural Kyrgyz in the Soviet period. In the lines above, the two brothers who are holding a feast are not only accused of extravagance and the theft of *kolkhoz* animals to pay for their expenses, they are also criticized for the consequences of their actions, being lazy and not meeting the quota in the livestock plans. The performance takes a didactic turn following these accusations, and the moral messages of the poets include the following:

Healed from the old plague,  
 We are a decent people now.  
 Man and woman all alike,  
 Equal now their rights.  
 When the sons and daughters  
 Of Kyrgyz progressed so much,  
 When we all on the road  
 To communism, why,  
 Ismail's brother  
 Marries two wives?  
 This, party and government  
 Denounces, now,  
 Chake, to these [to chairman of the *kolkhoz*:]  
 You should find a remedy.

(p. 240)

These lines were sung towards the end of the performance to draw attention to the general rewards of the socialist period in comparison to earlier periods. In an attempt to strongly highlight the differences, one of the poets heavily criticizes a relative of the rival poet on stage. The way the competitive character of the genre was practiced is especially noteworthy here. While the two poets were criticizing each other's hypothetical relatives or friends, being gazed upon by an audience watching a traditional cultural performance, they were actually fulfilling the party decree of the previous year. This decree laid down that the rewards of the new era had to be mentioned repeatedly during the performance, while at the same time reminding the locals of their responsibilities 'on the road to Communism'.

### ***Duelling in the Spirit of Socialism***

The first Congress of Kyrgyz *kolkhozniki* took place in February 1944. At the end of the Congress, poets Toktanaaly Shabdanbayev and Ismail Boronchiyev staged a poetry duel (Tokombaev 1972: 202-206), the former

performing as a poet from Jalalabad province, the latter as a poet from Osh province. In this performance, the two poets engaged in a competition in the spirit of socialism to prove that one is ahead of the other when it comes to fulfilling the production plan. After a short greeting, picking on each other and singing some humorous lines, Toktanaaly announces, 'Let's sing about the assignment of the Congress':

Did you hear the news?  
How did Osh do?  
If not, hear from me,  
Osh was behind Jalalabad,  
Could not compete, wiped out. (p. 240)

Ismail starts by accusing Jalalabad of not fulfilling the yearly plan and not keeping the initial promise that the *kolkhozy* have made. He adds that the harvests of cotton, barley, wheat and rice in Osh have been quite successful and that Jalalabad could never be a match for Osh. In response, Toktanaaly playfully teases Ismail, singing that Jalalabad is in second place in terms of the amount of harvest that year, while Osh came in fifth place. He asks whether Osh has any prize it can be proud of:

Our people work hard,  
We know the meaning of work.  
We are expected not to fail  
To fulfil our pledge,  
Jalalabad is not Osh.  
Many things blossomed,  
Barley, wheat, white rice  
Were grown with work.  
We received thirty thousand tenges  
As a prize from the province,  
In our arms lay  
The red flag of the Kyrgyz. (p. 240)

Ismail replies:

Order of the Red Banner,  
For the Kyrgyz, is a high prize.  
O Toko, strong as a mountain,  
Loosen your reins a bit.  
Did you see, dear Toko,

The lands of our Osh? [Did you also see]  
 A *kolkhoz* called 'Nariman'  
 Purchased an airplane!  
 Went off to offer its help  
 To destroy the armies of the West.  
 Should you be rich people,  
 Do you have anything similar [to this?] (pp. 240-1)

The two poets continue to challenge one another a little longer until they finally decide to stop 'mouth-fighting'. They advise the people of both regions to 'fulfil the five-year [plan] in four years as a Bolshevik', 'work harder as a [Kyrgyz] people to abolish laziness', and 'work harder in the future to overcome the shortcomings'.

### ***The Arrival of Peaceful Times***

Although *aitysh* involves challenging a rival poet to a poetry duel, oral poets in the Soviet era did not always confront each other on the stage. The dialogical nature of the duel, however, was also utilized to compare and contrast the pre-revolutionary and socialist eras. The poets sang, taking turns to denounce the old times and praise the new. Celebrations of the anniversary of the Revolution (1917) or landmark years in the history of the Kyrgyz SSR, such as the year it was established as autonomous socialist republic (1926) or as the Kyrgyz SSR (1936), would include oral poetry performances as part of the celebrations. Ensembles of poets would travel across the country, and the theme of socialist achievements was central to their performances. One such poetry performance celebrated the Kyrgyz with the arrival of peaceful times.<sup>137</sup> Dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution, the text of the performance was written in 1967. While the performances of the earlier periods criticized the backwardness of the Kyrgyz and mentioned the themes of cultural revolution as ideals of socialism, this performance celebrated the Kyrgyz in the new era, since they had achieved these goals and had become 'cultured' thanks to the achievements of the revolution. 'A New People in 50 Years' Time'<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> 'Elüü Jylda El Jany', TsGAKR f. 1558, op. 1, d. 9, pp. 21-43.

<sup>138</sup> 'Elüü Jylda El Jany' is an old saying in Kyrgyz, referring to the renewal of society whereby the young generation replaces the old one. As such, it is no coincidence that the poets celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution with this saying, highlighting the transformation of Kyrgyz society in line with the ideals of the Revolution. See also Allworth (1973: 3), 'The Kirgiz and Kazakhs share a popular old saying with special relevance to Central Asia today: "A nation regenerates itself in half a century"'.

begins with a description of the old times, the cruelty of tribal elites and the rich peasants:

New people in fifty years,  
I heard it from the folks, too.  
As the elderly say,  
You must have heard it, too.  
Compared to old times, today,  
People have advanced remarkably.  
Evolved even the nature of the earth,  
Beyond recognition, and so beautifully.  
How many centuries rolled along,  
People lived backward lives.  
In the times of Sultan, Khan,  
Men were given as a prize.  
They died before seeing,  
Joy and freedom of our times.

(p. 241)

The authority of the elderly as people ‘who have seen more’ is invoked in the opening lines. While respect for the elderly had always been a very strict traditional norm among the Kyrgyz, this sense of age hierarchy was especially brought into these ‘modern’ performances, where the elderly could be presented as a jury who could confirm the bad times of the old era, juxtaposing them with the rewards of the socialist era. In line with de-Stalinization policies, the name of Lenin had come to the fore, especially when the performances dealt with the initial efforts of the Soviet era:

The wise of the man, the honourable  
Ilyich came into this world.  
Wrestling with the bloodsucker,  
Tussling with the pilgrims,  
Walking through fire and blood,  
[and] Destroying them all,  
[he] Gave my people the gift  
Of the times of equality and justice.

(p. 241)

The rival poet went on about how the nations of Lenin fought their way through the hardships and obstacles they faced and, referring to WWII, how they bravely faced the ‘the fervent Fascists’, the ‘dark-faced enemies’, and defeated them in less than five years, ‘blowing off the tyrant’s ashes in

Berlin'. Having mentioned the 'glorious victory', the poets turned again to the present day:

Our people, in fifty years,  
Thought up so much, creatively,  
Factory, industry and many more,  
All are hard-won victory.  
Our strength flew high, and  
Reached the other side of the moon.  
Times of freedom, times alight,  
Just turned fifty years [old].

(pp. 241-2)

Reference to the achievements in the realm of science and technology was also commonplace in the performances of the 1960s and 1970s. As indisputable proof of socialism's victory over the West, the first satellite, *Sputnik*, launched in 1957, was widely celebrated in the press and radio, and oral poetry performances also mention it as a second blow to the West, following the victory of WWII. Following the political and industrial revolutions, the revolution on the third front of culture was mentioned in the final lines of the performance:

In fifty years' time,  
Our traditions were cured.  
Backwardness, feudalism, and laziness  
Were all removed.  
Woman-man all alike,  
Equal are their rights.  
Advanced from all sides,  
Merry Soviet people [we are].  
A people of the Union,  
Equal with all nations.  
All defects are removed,  
Winter camps, cities bright with light.  
Our people, in fifty years,  
Rescued, with diligence and hard work.  
[became] A cultured people,  
Having been purified.  
Burdened with so much work,  
And, with mountainous strength,  
[we, the Kyrgyz are]  
Welcoming the festival [of the anniversary]

(p. 242)



The creation of this text coincided with the times when socialism, as a project, matured in many respects among the formerly nomadic Kyrgyz. Collectivization and sedentarization were achieved despite major reactions, literacy was liquidated through mass schooling, WWII ended with a victory, and the industrial revolution was achieved. In the text, 'backwardness, feudalism and laziness' were all portrayed almost synonymously as 'traditional values'. Among the advances in all aspects of everyday life were issues of gender equality, given as an example in the text, which, for the Kyrgyz, meant the abolition of polygamy, bride capture, brideprice, women's right to education and work. Moreover, *tazalyk* in the text literally means cleanliness, but it could also mean, metaphorically, washing one's hand of the dirt of the past. Thus, following the transformation of the *byt* among the Kyrgyz, the oral poets claimed that Kyrgyz people had become *tarbiyaly*, meaning well-behaved, educated, and, more importantly, *cultured*.

### **Conclusion: Kyrgyz Oral Poets as Cultural Revolutionaries**

Oral poetry performances were not considered folklore in the classical sense by either the Kyrgyz themselves or party officials. After a process of formal education in musical theory, literacy and socialist ideology, oral poets became cultural workers, as well as ideal 'local allies' who would disseminate the agenda of the cultural revolution through their oral poetry performances, which were already highly esteemed among the pastoral nomadic Kyrgyz. The traditional authority of the oral poets took on a different meaning for the Kyrgyz in the Soviet era due to the socialist state's sponsorship of them and their performances. Once wandering minstrels, the oral poets started touring the country in ensembles and became members of the Writers' Union, their works being published in books and newspapers. Whether oral or written, their works were full of socialist realist themes. In short, the cultural revolution transformed these traditional cultural performances into modern socialist performances.

Moreover, the oral poets turned into cultural revolutionaries among the rural Kyrgyz. Their didactic tone in the pre-revolutionary era, explored in Chapter 2, was extensively utilized by the party to transform the *byt*, build a socialist morality and cultivate the new Soviet person. The dialogical nature of the poets' performances was conducive to bringing socialist competition on to the stage, where poets would judge each other's community according to socialist norms and values and call for more diligent work. Similarly, these dialogical performances also allowed a broader comparison between the pre-revolutionary and Soviet eras in terms of material progress. Regardless of rising levels of literacy and the spread of other channels of communications such as TV, oral poetry ensembles' schedules in late 1970s

were no less busy than in the 1930s, though the themes of their performances changed gradually over time.

The official history of Kyrgyz oral poetry in the Soviet era reveals that the civilizing mission of the socialist modernization project did not use a vocabulary that was completely alien to the rural Kyrgyz; rather, it relied heavily on the existing traditional sources in the construction and maintenance of a socialist collective identity. The use of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances in the process of building socialism resonates with Martin's description of the goals of *korenizatsiia*: 'It would make Soviet power seem "native" (*rodnaia*), "intimate" (*blizkaia*), "popular" (*narodnaia*) and "comprehensible" (*poniatnaia*). It would address the positive psychological needs of nationalism: "The [non-Russian] masses would see that Soviet power and her organs are the affair of their own efforts, the embodiment of their desires"' (Martin 2001: 12).

This promotion of existing traditional channels is illustrative of a grounded vision of modernity. The way ideological messages were conveyed through these traditional performances in the Soviet era had its roots in the didactic nature of the performances of the pre-revolutionary period, regardless of the transformation of themes and messages. Moreover, the Soviet era performances also set the tone for poetry performances in the independence era which, as I will demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, are also highly political. While the performances were still significant social institutions, and became even more prominent through state socialism's sponsorship of them, they, or the oral poets themselves, had to keep up with the ever-changing moral landscape and the kinds of morality that were considered proper over time.

This chapter has presented a particular story of the cultural revolution on the peripheries as closely administered by the Communist Party. The next chapter will point to the fact that, hard though party officials tried, there were limits to the extent to which they could monitor the oral poets' performances. In fact, in a quite parallel manner, the very means by which party officials attempted to transform local cultures into a socialist mould were utilized by local population in ways that were contradictory to the interests of the party. While Kyrgyz oral poets improvised in support of socialism on stage, off the socialist stage they were still singers of tales, songs and epics, and continued to be the authentic voice of the ancestors.



## ***Chapter 4***

### **Collaborative Construction of the Soviet Experience**

As for the harmful aspects of the Soviet ideology, especially for improvising oral poets, not fully grasping their free character<sup>139</sup>, the state always employed them to spread the news about the novelties and developments that were taking place across the country. Welcoming the guests who visit our capital city, as well as seeing them off with their performance; reaching out to people and advising them on their performance on all sorts of prominent cultural messages; singing at all sorts of festivals and jubilees, in front of the crowds, *whether they wanted it or not*, and many other duties were among the responsibilities of the oral poets (Akmataliev 2012: 637-638, emphasis is mine).

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, if any reference is made to the official performances of the Soviet-era oral poets, either in scholarly works or in discussions with ordinary people, such accounts would most likely include passages like the one above, couched in a somewhat apologetic tone and describing rather superficially the kind of jobs that the Kyrgyz oral poets were tasked with in the Soviet era. Moreover, unless it is unavoidable, such references to these official performances are not mentioned at all, which gave me the impression that either my sources were trivializing them or that I was crossing into a culturally intimate zone. On the other hand, I was able to find sources where offstage performances<sup>140</sup> by the very same oral poets were described, explored and analysed by Kyrgyz social scientists from diverse academic disciplines. However, accounts of these offstage

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<sup>139</sup> 'Free character' here refers to the fact that they were improvising oral poets and that the state limited their artistic production by forcing them to write down their poetry before their performances, some of which were censored either partially or wholly.

<sup>140</sup> Offstage performance or unofficial performances, which are the subject of this chapter, are performances the organization of which was not ordered by the Philharmonics administration, which, by default, makes them unofficial and illegal from the perspective of the Communist Party.

performances did not appear in print until the early 1970s. If party documents referred to such offstage performances during earlier times, it was only to condemn their practice. This paradoxical case provides us with two quite different and rewarding readings of the history of these traditional cultural performances in the Soviet era.



Plate 10. Tuuganbai Abdiyev, singing at the opening ceremony of the National Competition of Craftsmen at the Exhibition of National Economic Achievements of Kyrgyz SSR, Frunze 1984.

As the archival documents attest, throughout the Soviet era Kyrgyz oral poets' systematic employment by the Philharmonics was the epitome of the politics of the cultural *korenizatsiia* in the Soviet peripheries. As prestigious 'local allies', Kyrgyz oral poets carried out the task of socialist 'cultural service', which consisted of translating the new ideology into the vernacular, exhorting the masses to transform their everyday lives (*byt*) in accordance with the demands of the new era, denouncing the pre-revolutionary past and

consolidating social support behind the socialist regime, all through the language of the oral poets, which served as conduits that were socially and historically appropriate. According to the language of the official documents, Kyrgyz oral poets could no longer sing the songs of the old period, they were entirely banned from improvising on stage, they had to fulfil their concert plans across the country and, following a series of in-house training seminars at the Philharmonics, they had become the voice of socialist ideology, dressed up in a traditional garment.

However, from the mid-1960s onwards a number of sources from the late Soviet era speak of Kyrgyz oral poets in terms that contradict the ambitious language of the archival documentation. In these semi-official, biographical and journalistic accounts, which expound on oral poetry performances that took place as early as 1940s, oral poets were praised for their close rapport with the rural Kyrgyz. The performances retold in these accounts are not the same as those official socialist performances documented in the previous chapter in that the former were unauthorized, unplanned and uncensored, unlike the official ones. According to these accounts, where oral poets reappear as the voice of the ancestors, oral poets nonetheless continued to sing epics, legends and other oral traditions the performance of which had been strongly forbidden by the party.

In a similar vein, the literature on Kyrgyz oral traditions published just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union celebrates the Soviet-era oral poets as the preservers and custodians of Kyrgyz traditional culture. While they make no reference to the socialist cultural service of the oral poets, these accounts are full of oral poets' written poetry on the subjects of love, friendship, family, patriotism, nature, hard work, etc., which are promoted as the masterpieces of Kyrgyz traditional art. I observed a similar trend in my conversations with contemporary oral poets, as well as scholars of Kyrgyz folklore. During our meetings, when I expressed my interest in the role of oral poets in contemporary Kyrgyz society, I was frequently directed to examine first the works of Toktogul Satylganov, Kalyk Akiyev, Alymkul Üsönbayev, Osmonkul Bölöbalayev, among other oral poets of the twentieth century, so that I would be fully able to appreciate the quality of Kyrgyz oral poetry and to grasp the significance of these cultural performances for the Kyrgyz. During our conversations, one point related to oral poetry that was consistently made clear from the outset was that 'oral poetry is our cultural wealth' (*madanii bailyk*) or that it is 'not a material but a spiritual heritage' (*matarialdyk emes-manaidyk muras*, a reference to the discourse of 'intangible cultural heritage'). The discourse on *madanii bailyk* is affirmed in countless works, ranging from articles, dissertations and media coverage to, more recently, websites devoted to these oral poets, their oral

performances, verbal duels, anecdotes, achievements, etc. As the singers of this *madanii bailyk*, oral poets are acclaimed as the custodians and preservers of traditional Kyrgyz culture in these works. Descriptions in praise of these oral poets, such as those replicated below, are ubiquitous in the works devoted to them:

Kalyk was an oral poet with an outstanding place in the oral poetry of the Kyrgyz, one whose fame was spread to Kyrgyz and Kazakh alike, with his red tongue; he devoted his everlasting talent to truth, respect and morality. He was one of the few highly respectable oral poets of our nation (Akmataliev 2012: 454).

One of the best representatives of the Kyrgyz oral poetry tradition ... He [Alymkul] was the best reciter of the epic works of the Kyrgyz ... A skilled *komuz* player, an exceptional singer with a very pleasant voice. His performance of the melodies and songs of Toktogul, his great master, was particularly remarkable (Asanov 2004: 228).

On whatever theme he sings, with his superior free-fall songs, the weight of his words, the popularity of his verses, the speed of his improvisation, the power of his descriptions and repartee ... His memory was especially gifted. [He] was capable of storing in his mind so many names, information and facts that he heard. [Osmonkul] was one of the best master oral poets ... (Asanov 2004: 65).

How can we account for such seemingly paradoxical accounts of the diverse historiography of these cultural performances? How do onstage and offstage performances differ in form and content? What does the double role oral poets played as socialist cultural workers and the ‘voice of the ancestors’ suggest in terms of the broader socialist modernization project? Building on the extant literature on the official discourse of state socialism as opposed to the ways in which it is negotiated on the ground, the present chapter sets out to disentangle these contrasting accounts with regard to the role of oral poets in the Soviet era. It aims to frame alternative historical accounts of these cultural performances within the perspective of multiple histories. Rather than prioritizing the official over the unofficial history, the written over the oral, the Soviet over the post-Soviet era, or resorting to ‘binary socialism’ (Yurchak 2006), I suggest that a more holistic approach better captures the complexities of the socialist encounter in the peripheries.

Building on research that highlights the perspective of ‘collaborative construction’, I shed light on the imbrication of socialist institutions with

pre-socialist cultural practices to contextualize better the socialist legacy of cultural politics in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan, which is a central theme of the next chapter. The present chapter will add another analytical layer to the basic premises put forward in the previous chapter by looking at the same group of people – socialist-era oral poets – but now discussing accounts of their stories and performances in a different light. This chapter will also help put into perspective how and why Soviet-era oral poets are ‘ancestralized’ in the era of independence through luxurious celebrations of their birthdays as national festivals, rather than being denounced, given the very strong nationalist discourses that have been sweeping through post-socialist countries for more than two decades now.

### **Contextualizing the Multiple Histories**

While the lyrics of onstage performances were written down in advance and enormous pressure was placed on the oral poets to ‘recite their lines’ during their performances, the offstage performances were spontaneous compositions. Their performances were never rehearsed, the events were not recorded, and the poetry of these performances was only transmitted orally. It was not until three to four decades later that reports of these performances, the fact that they even took place, were published. Treating these performances as historical events has certain methodological challenges. Clearly, data concerning these various ‘registers’, i.e. written vs. oral, are qualitatively different. As Vansina argues, the fact that oral traditions had unwritten sources and were formulated in a particular way so that they could be orally transmitted and that ‘their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings’ gives them a special feature:

These special features pose a problem for the historian. Do they *a priori* deprive oral tradition of all validity as a historical source? If not, are there means for testing its reliability? ... I hope to show that oral tradition is not necessarily untrustworthy as a historical source, but, on the contrary, merits a certain amount of credence within certain limits (Vansina 1965: 1).

In a similar vein, I suggest that the authenticity of the orally transmitted traditions discussed in this chapter are of secondary significance in my analysis of offstage performances in the Soviet era. By juxtaposing such ‘alternative or competing narratives’ to the official history of the socialist era explored in the previous chapter, I aim to shed light on ‘lived histories’, ‘Introducing local memories into history enriches our understanding of the diverse and contested nature of lived history. Arguably, it is contested memories that can save history from becoming another type of fiction’



(Bellér-Hann 2008: 14). Similarly, Baldauf frames such accounts as ‘rich source material for a yet-to-be-written cultural history’ (Baldauf 2013b: 115). I argue that what is more significant in these accounts is whether the final versions of such traditions and their sources can be analysed as alternative registers to the official party documents of the Soviet era and whether by doing so a more accurate picture of the modernizing encounter between the socialist state and people in the peripheries can be drawn. Dismissing these unofficial accounts as partial and parochial may simply reproduce conventional presumptions about not only the all-powerful socialist state, but also the view that peoples in the peripheries are the victims of a foreign regime, their traditional cultures being merely weak.

The unofficial performances that are described in this chapter share certain characteristics with James Scott’s concept of ‘hidden transcripts’ (1990). Examining the themes of power, hegemony, resistance and subordination, Scott argues that ‘a shared critique of the domination’ may develop among the subordinates who in ‘large-scale structures of domination nevertheless have a fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant’ (Scott 1990: xi). Moreover, he argues that ‘the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless’ could be interpreted as vehicles for alluding to a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity. ‘Hidden transcripts’ are not confined to subordinates but are also practiced by the dominant; however, the transcripts of these two groups never come into contact with one another: ‘the hidden transcripts of dominant and subordinate are, in most circumstances, never in direct contact. Each participant will be familiar with the public transcript and the hidden transcript of his or her circle, but not with the hidden transcript of the other’ (1990: 15).

While finding the term ‘transcript’ quite useful, Humphrey argues that, due to differing structures of domination, the concept of a ‘hidden transcript’ has limited applicability for ‘encapsulated societies subject to Soviet type domination’ (1994: 22). Speaking of the Soviet system’s imposition of structural unity, ‘nesting hierarchies’ and ‘nesting domination’, she suggests that subordination and domination were both present in almost everyone’s life in the Soviet era.<sup>141</sup> As an apt example, she mentions how a naive-looking rural Mongolian visiting the capital city might very well be part of a web of power relations and well-versed in its transcripts back in his native mountains. Thus, as an alternative to Scott’s formulation, Humphrey suggests another concept, that of ‘evocative

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<sup>141</sup> For similar arguments regarding ‘dilemmas of public and private’, see Gal and Kligman (2000).

transcripts', which she defines as texts intended to elicit or evoke a particular interpretation beyond their surface meaning:

They come to the fore in political quasi-hegemonies when previous codes of classes and ethnic groups are suppressed and two pervasive new kinds of discourse are maintained throughout society by force and by fear: a highly ideological, stilted, and mostly written official discourse, and 'all the rest', which may be oral and informal but nevertheless must maintain a semblance of conformity in public (Humphrey 1994: 23).

However, in the case of unsanctioned oral poetry performances, we do not encounter either Scott's 'disguised, muted, and veiled' ideological resistance to the ruling class, nor Humphrey's texts, which are riddle-like and 'ambiguous by design', intended to evoke a dual reaction. All the accounts mentioned in this chapter, where the meetings of oral poets with the people are related in detail, were printed in the early 1970s and were made accessible to all members of society and party officials alike. They are neither veiled nor ambiguous, but straightforward accounts of cultural practices that were deemed counter-revolutionary in the official language. Their transcript-like nature thus comes to the fore due to their quasi-legal appearance and the fact that neither side, neither the official history of the Soviet era nor the unofficial history of the post-socialist era, make reference to each other's existence, which in turn complicates the official discourse of the cultural revolution. While retaining the concept of a 'transcript' to refer to the alternating registers, I consider these multiple layers of historical knowledge to be 'parallel transcripts'. They neither cancel out nor acknowledge each other, but coexist, albeit with some disturbance to both parties. To follow Humphrey's lead, such transcripts are only possible in encapsulated societies subject to Soviet-type domination where almost everyone in society is made subject to relations of power.

The oral poetry performances that are the production sites of these transcripts take place in the presence of local people and local officials, as well as the notables of these particular regions. However, more prominently, as the producers of these transcripts the oral poets themselves are nationwide popular state artists, members of the writers' union, or even parliamentary deputies, as in the case of the poet Alymkul (see below). As the previous chapter suggests, in the early years of the Soviet era such unsanctioned performances would have never been tolerated. When the multiple histories that trickle down from these parallel transcripts are taken into account, we see that the militancy of the language of the cultural revolution fades away before it reaches the peripheries, which, I suggest,

made the process of cultural revolution less rigid and more tolerable for the rural Kyrgyz.

### ***Beyond 'Binary Socialism'***

There have been calls recently in the literature on Soviet Central Asia for a more grounded understanding of the socialist modernization project in the region. Deniz Kandiyoti, for instance, explores two major strains of literature portraying Soviet history in the region either as a 'colonial onslaught' or 'cultural stasis' (1996). The arguments championing the colonial onslaught position are summarized in terms of a near devastation of local social institutions, in which 'the modernization of the "backward" Central Asian populations mandated nothing short of a systematic onslaught upon existing patterns of social institutions, identities and loyalties' (1996: 531). The national-territorial delimitation of the *Turkestanski Krai* of the Russian Empire, Soviet nationality policy, the adaption of the Cyrillic alphabet and the destruction of Islamic institutions are cited as evidence for this school of thought. A rival argument to this position suggests that 'communism barely scratched the surface and hardly penetrated under the cultural skin' (1996: 531). However, anthropologically informed research into the official and local historiography of the region suggests a revision is needed of these two 'gate-keeping' positions in research into the Soviet era in Central Asia. The opposing discourses pitting the claim of a 'loss of civilization' against the argument of a perpetuation of 'sturdy local cultures' problematize either the unlimited power of the Soviet system to radically transform these local communities or the total waste of resources committed by the Soviet state in trying to transform them with an 'immutable cultural essence'. While Russified urban populations are mentioned as proof of the former, the proliferation of nationalist discourses in the region, with a sustained interest in the 'deep history' of their communities, is projected as confirmation of the latter. These fragmented and partial readings are far from providing satisfactory accounts of the socialist modernization project and local responses to that process.

A closer exploration of the history of cultural performances not only provides a window into the politics of revolutionizing 'culture' and the revolution *through* 'culture' in the Soviet era, it also permits a sustained examination of the responses of the peripheries, as well as their own positions in relation to the cultural revolution. Thus, a more balanced analysis suggests that, regardless of the language of the party documents, the Soviet experiment with local social life was not necessarily an example of top-down hegemonic domination, but rather, at least to some extent, was resisted and constantly negotiated in the peripheries.

A growing body of literature on the lives of peoples in the former Soviet Union has pointed out that there was a more dynamic, multi-faceted relationship between the centre and the periphery than previously assumed. The ethnographies focusing on kinship networks, traditional forms of social organization, livelihood strategies and their interactions with socialist institutions and practices have largely challenged the presumptions stemming from Cold War conventions (Bacon 1966; Humphrey 1983; Olcott 1987; Bouchet 1991; Hann 1992, 1993; Creed 1998).<sup>142</sup> The way local people negotiated socialism on the ground is skilfully captured in Humphrey's pioneering ethnography, where she draws attention to the imbrication of large-scale socialist economic policies with Buryat social institutions:

Buryat *kolkhozniks* continued to explain many aspects of the Soviet world to a great extent by their own patterns of thought. Rather than an insertion of a Buryat native content into Soviet modes of explanation, we find the reverse: the phenomena of the Soviet world appear, disconnected from their theoretical origins, structured by a Buryat consciousness (Humphrey 1983: 441).

Ethnographies of rural socialism written more recently came to similar conclusions about the agency of local communities in reconciling the demands of the system with their own needs. Working in a rural village in eastern Europe, for instance, Gerald Creed maintains that villagers in Zamfirovo were able to adjust to socialism while at the same time modifying it to their own requirements and needs. Creed argues that this process allowed for 'a degree of self-actualization for villagers [which is] missed in macro-level views of socialist society' (Creed 1998: 276; Wolfe 2000; cf. Hoffmann 2003). In a similar vein, Bruce Grant has more recently argued that

All manner of revisionist historiography in recent decades has tempered earlier works of the totalitarian school, similarly challenging our understandings of state socialism's actual ability to direct its constituents as ambitiously as it officially claimed to. That is to say, socialist ideology was regularly met with accommodations, evasions, and unexpected incorporations in a variety of ways (Grant 2011: 658-659).

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<sup>142</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these works, see Kandiyoti (1996).

The scholarship on Soviet folklore and cultural performances is a suitable example for demonstrating how far the discourse of the totalitarian school of historiography of the Soviet era, or Cold War-era political conventions, has been diffused in social-science research on the peoples of the former Soviet Union. The use of folklore under the auspices of the party has been highlighted in earlier works examining the cultural politics of the Soviet era (Oinas 1973, 1975; cf. Dorson 1976; Miller 1990; Porter 1997;). In their assessment of the role folklore played in that period, however, these works usually refer to the end products, that is, texts that had been heavily edited and canonized so that they were not only politically correct, but also ideologically driven. Frank Miller's work *Folklore for Stalin* (1990) is a prime example of such scholarship. Miller claims that during the Soviet era, starting in the 1920s, 'true folklore'<sup>143</sup> was replaced with 'folk stylization' or what he calls 'pseudofolklore', 'by a government eager to miss no opportunity to spread Bolshevik ideology, and by scholars desperate to vindicate a field that seemed to be losing prestige' (1990: 4). What is otherwise an excellent account of the official history of the cultural revolution, with a good comparative textual analysis of Russian folklore, Miller nonetheless tells only one part of the story. A more dangerous ailment of this scholarship is its focus on the party's official discourse, the *a priori* presumption being that this official discourse was observed without any resistance, deviation or accommodation.<sup>144</sup>

### **Debunking Official Discourse: From 'Cultural Workers' to 'Singers of Tales'**

Since we are managing the literature systematically, it would be inconsistent to leave oral creative arts to the mercy of fate: it is necessary for the proletarian consciousness to subdue spontaneous forces in the oral culture as well. It is natural that bourgeois folklorists will be against this 'meddling' in the 'creative work of the folk'. But I would remind these bourgeois scholars that, in fact, 'original' oral arts were always under pressure from the ruling

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<sup>143</sup> It is a little difficult to infer what the author means by this phrase. He seems to be criticizing the view that 'folklorism' was never innocent and that the earliest works of folklore were the handmaiden of nineteenth-century nationalists in Europe. For a broad discussion of the topic, see Finnegan (1992: 30-34).

<sup>144</sup> More recent scholarship on Soviet history has emphasized socialism as a modernizing state project, highlighting its 'collaborative construction' with local populations, see Kotkin (1995), David-Fox (1997), Martin (2001) and Hirsch (2005). Igmen's historical analysis is a prime example of the experience of the Central Asian peoples, particularly that of the Kyrgyz (2012).

classes. It is strange to proclaim the inviolability of folklore nowadays when deliberate supervision comes not from outside but from the very heart of the working masses (Sokolov 1931: 92-98; cited in Panchenko 2012: 434-435).

The idea of the 'collectivization of the arts' was introduced in the first half of the 1930s, shortly after the greater collectivization campaign. The aim of this policy was not to 'leave oral creative arts to the mercy of fate', but rather to 'subdue spontaneous forces in the oral culture'. The implementation of this policy meant the beginning of the end for oral poetry performances due to its exclusively improvisational quality. Furthermore, the 'collectivization of the arts' was also intended to halt the artists' random performances. As in all aspects of social and economic life, the arts and culture, as well as their production and consumption, had to be *planned* by the party officials and the state. To realize the policy of collectivizing the arts, the Department of Arts under the Council of Peoples' Commissar of the Kyrgyz SSR issued a resolution in 1937, recommending that no artistic performances should take place unless it had been solicited, planned and approved by the relevant authorities. A decree issued in May 1939 sent out to regional committees of the Communist Party, regional executive committees and educational institutions and published in the press reads as follows:

In confirmation of Resolution No. 85 of the Department of Arts under the Council of Peoples' Commissar of the KSSR dated 19.04.1937, without necessary documentation and prior approval from the Department of Performing Arts and the Committee of Central Repertoire (*glavrepetkom*), it is forbidden to hold performances at theatres, cinemas, clubs<sup>145</sup>, yards, parks, or anywhere within the borders of the Kyrgyz SSR.<sup>146</sup>

The implications of this decree went beyond the explicit effect that oral poets were no longer allowed to improvise their art. More importantly, it meant the exclusion of these popular performances from the traditional social life of the rural Kyrgyz. According to the decree, oral poets could no longer perform at rural festivities such as life-cycle events or other sorts of local or regional gatherings.

One of the earliest pieces of evidence that this party decree was repeatedly disobeyed comes from an official source where oral poets were admonished for their 'imprudence' in not heeding official regulations. In a

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<sup>145</sup> 'Club' is used to refer to smaller 'houses of culture'. Also see Donahoe and Habeck (2011) and Igmen (2012).

<sup>146</sup> Decree No. 121, 'On the Department of Arts under the Council of People's Commissars of KSSR', 19 May 1939. TsGAKR f. 1603, op. 1, d. 33, p. 90.

report entitled 'Concert repertoires must be improved further', dated October 1950, the head of the Arts Council of the Ministry of Culture provides his assessment of the state of affairs in relation to Kyrgyz art. K. Kümüşhaliev reports, 'The Bolshevik Party and comrade Stalin, our wise mentor, has been relentlessly toiling for the progress of the arts and culture of the Soviet people'. In line with recent 'historic' decisions taken by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (*Central'nyj Komitet Vsesoyuznoj Kommunisticheskoy Partii*), he adds that the Kyrgyz State Chorus has revised its repertoire to make it 'ideologically accurate', as well as 'of high artistic quality'. Following a long list of remarks in praise of achievements in the field of music and art, he suggests that the blossoming of Kyrgyz music and arts that is 'national in form and socialist in content' can only be attributed to the 'successful implementation of Leninist-Stalinist nationalism policy in real life'. In the second half of the report, he refers to some of the shortcomings in the development of Kyrgyz traditional music, orchestras of traditional instruments, etc. Towards the end of his report, he pointedly criticizes those who do not adhere to concert programs which have been finalized by the repertoire committee (*repetkom*) before the ensembles leave for the provinces, regions and *kolkhozy*: 'due to their thoughtlessness and misbehaviour, they sing those songs which have been removed from their repertoire and are no longer part of the concert program':

Such disorder (improvising on stage) has been observed with the oral poets Boronchiyev and Shabdanbayev, as well as several other soloists. Moreover, oral poets, when they travel to *kolkhozy* to give concerts, sing songs and fairy tales which have no ideology at gatherings after the concerts (*konseritten kiyinki oturushtarda, jöö-jomoktuu ideasyz yrlardy da yrdai berishet*).<sup>147</sup>

The Philharmonics administration was tasked with ensuring the highest quality of the concert programs, while at the same time controlling the conduct of concert programs without any disorder. The concert programs had to be ideologically and politically appropriate, and their artistic quality also had to be carefully checked, since 'poetry and music cannot be separated from the social life of the Soviet people, a close companion of the labouring masses, a sentiment in their hearts' (*ibid.*: 3).

Used by itself, the word *jomok* refers to epics and legends; however, as a phrase, *jöö-jomok* is translated as fairy tales. Its use in the report devaluates, almost mockingly, the significance of the vast body of the Kyrgyz people's oral traditions. Moreover, epics and legends referred to as fairy tales are also assessed as *ideasyz yrlar*, meaning that they not only lack

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<sup>147</sup> *Kyzyl Kyrgyzstan*, 14 October 1950, p. 3.

a philosophy and moral lesson, but also that they are frivolous. As a prime example of the policy of the 'collectivization of the arts', the head of the Arts Council suggests that any artistic creation which is not socialist in content is redundant. As I showed in Chapter 3 with regard to the content of official performances, even an incorrect lexical choice or a mistake in the use of a tense would readily lead to the persecution of the oral poets. Not only the party officials, but also the oral poets knew all too well of Toktogul's biography, discussed in Chapter 2, who, in the pre-revolutionary era, was part of the notorious gatherings that lead to the Andijan Rebellion, for which Toktogul was arrested and sent to exile. Why, then, would the oral poets continue these after-performance gatherings despite the risk of persecution? As the following examples will demonstrate, such gatherings were by-products of the employment of oral poets for the political ends of the state, which kept them touring the country throughout the year, among the people.

### ***A Note on Poets' Gatherings with the Locals***

Every evening he attracted around him a crowd of gaping admirers, who greedily listened to his stories and songs. His imagination was remarkably fertile ... The greater part of the rapturous recitation was improvised by him as he proceeded, the subject alone being borrowed usually from some tradition. His wonderfully correct intonation, which enabled everyone who even did not understand the words to guess their meaning, and the pathos and fire he skilfully imparted to his strain, showed that he was justly entitled to the admiration of the Kirghiz as their chief bard! (Valikhanov 1865: 290-291).

With regard to the institution of oral poetry, the policies on the collectivization of the arts were directed at breaking the traditional bonds between oral poets like these popular folk artists and the rural Kyrgyz population. However, according to alternative historical accounts, the arrival of oral poetry ensembles in rural Kyrgyzstan marked the beginning of a number of days full of festivities. As folk artists with traditional authority, the oral poets enjoyed an immense amount of cultural capital among the locals (Bourdieu 1986); moreover, given their new role as prestigious cultural workers, they were also considered honourable guests from the capital city. Thus, whenever a poetry ensemble travelled to a *kolkhoz*, it was the responsibility of the members of that *kolkhoz* to warmly welcome the



artists, arrange a decent place for them to stay and prepare a *dastarkon*<sup>148</sup> for them, for which several sheep were slaughtered. When the concert was over, the poets would go to the place where they would eat and rest afterwards. Every villager knew by tradition that oral poets would continue singing past midnight and that those who were interested would gather around the poets to be part of these off-stage performances. Such close relations between oral poets and local people were also confirmed by my oral history interviews. A Soviet-era oral poet, Zamirbek Üsönbayev (b. 1951) who started working at the Philharmonics as part of oral poetry ensembles when he was just seventeen years old, told me that during their trips to the regions, either in the houses of the chairmen of *kolkhozy* or in local guest houses, every evening local people would gather around the poets to hear the epics, folk songs, tales, anecdotes, melodies or poetry duels of the master poets of the pre-revolutionary era.<sup>149</sup> Moreover, poets would certainly perform at locals' life-cycle events if they coincided with their stay in that region. During my trips to rural Kyrgyzstan, there were always a couple of families in every village who were proud of having hosted ensembles of the poets in their houses in the past, and they would talk about how those gatherings turned into small festivals on their own. While all of these actually indicate an undercurrent of continuity with pre-revolutionary practices, as I will describe in the following sections, the traditional content of the performances in these gatherings was nevertheless blended with socialist themes. Offstage performances were as frequent as onstage performances, but they were never endorsed by the authorities, and their performance was also strictly forbidden. Thus, while the party reinvented oral poetry performances as a Soviet tradition, entirely in contrast to the arguments of the folklore scholarship of the Soviet era, all sorts of oral traditions were performed during the *kommandirovkas* of the poetry ensembles. An examination of how these events are described, as well as the content of the poetry that was sung during these gatherings, provides insights into a distinct aspect of socialist modernization at work among the rural Kyrgyz. In particular, Ashyraaly Aitaliyev's portrayal of one such meeting is worth closer inspection.

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<sup>148</sup> Literally a long, sometimes round, low table loaded with food that people eat while sitting on the floor. In colloquial usage, it also refers to a feast among the Kyrgyz.

<sup>149</sup> He was the head of the State Philharmonics in Bishkek when I interviewed him in August 2013, but was removed from his position three months later.

### *The ritual greeting of Ashyraaly and Osmonkul*

Ashyraaly Aitaliyev (1927-2008) belonged to the last generation of Soviet-era master oral poets.<sup>150</sup> Born in a rural area of Kant, in Chuy province, he remained in his native village and worked for the local *kolkhoz* until he was eighteen, whereupon, in 1945, he met the master oral poet Osmonkul Bölöbalayev. Following a performance at a ceremonial meeting between the two poets, Osmonkul sought out the administration of the State Philharmonics in the capital city of Bishkek (then Frunze) and proposed Ashyraaly for employment as an oral poet. Thus, as a young, gifted singer of oral traditions, Ashyraaly worked as part of oral poetry ensembles under the State Philharmonics from 1946 until he retired in 1998. Afterwards, he worked at different jobs teaching music classes at various universities and training younger generations of oral poets at an oral poetry school until he died in 2008.<sup>151</sup> The following is an account of his 'ritual greeting' with his future master, Osmonkul.<sup>152</sup> It is based on Ashyraaly's unpublished autobiographical writing, which, as his wife Naila testified in one of our interviews, he wrote in the late 1970s.

Although Ashyraaly transmitted this account orally on many occasions, it was not published until 2008, after the famous Kyrgyz ethnomusicologist Balbai Alagushov interviewed the poet on the radio and published the piece online a month after his death.<sup>153</sup> Jenishbek Jumakadyr, a prominent master oral poet and Ashyraaly's apprentice, published the account in 2010 as part of the biographical work he wrote for his master, *Ashyke*, for which he worked several years in the personal archive of his master. Thus, the account below is particularly noteworthy, as it appeared in press in the era of independence.

Some months after the end of World War II, in December 1945, the oral poets Osmonkul, Kalyk, Aktan, Ibrai and Shabdanbayev went to the *kolkhoz* in the Nooruz region of Kant city to give a concert in a large *kolkhoz* outbuilding. As the news spread during the day that the poets would be singing in the evening at the house of Aljan, an old, respectable man of the

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<sup>150</sup> Among the most prominent of the last generation of Soviet-era oral poets are Estebe Tursunaliyev (1931-2005), Tuuganbai Abdiyev (1937-2008), Zamirbek Üsönbayev (1951-) and Rakhmatulla Kozukeev (1955-).

<sup>151</sup> This school, *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu*, will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

<sup>152</sup> Ritual meetings of poets are a tradition strictly observed among the Kyrgyz oral poets. When young talents meet a master poet for the first time, the two perform a dialogical improvised performance as a ritual called *uchurashuu*, where the younger poet asks for the master's blessings, and the master evaluates his performance and offers prayers to him.

<sup>153</sup> Alagushov (2008) is available online: <https://www.azattyk.org/a/1351798.html>, last accessed 14 March 2021.

village, Ashyraaly, among others, visited Aljan's house. As the poets took turns to perform, some of them played melodies they had composed during the war years, while others told anecdotes and moral and witty stories. Long into the night, Osmonkul was given the word, as Ashyraaly describes it: 'I was impressed by his performance. While he sang, he commemorated his peers from the village, praised hard-working individuals, continued to sing of the bravery of those soldiers who just returned from the front, and also exhorted people to hard work and labour' (Toktobekov 2010: 23)<sup>154</sup>. During a break, a relative of Ashyraaly told Osmonkul that the young poet wished to have a ritual greeting with him, after which Osmonkul passed his *komuz* to Ashyraaly and asked him to start singing. Ashyraaly, caught by surprise, initially panicked, but after hearing the cheering from the audience he began his performance. In his initial lines, he addressed Osmonkul as 'my master, my father-like' (*atamdai bolgon agayim*) and sought his guidance and blessings. He then stated that he had so far remained in his village and performed for the local community whenever the people drew together, and he expressed his wish to accompany Osmonkul on his travels so that he could receive training, his oral poetry skills could improve and his name would thus spread among the people. Then Ashyraaly continued his performance by expressing his appreciation of the local people for welcoming the oral poetry ensemble into their village:

A goliath of people gathered for you,  
 Performances held during the day.  
 All entertained and pleased,  
 The people of Marx *kolkhoz*.  
*Kolkhoz* people are joyous,  
 From your mouth, you pour honey,  
 Their wounded hearts, now joyful,  
 Filled with your glorious songs.  
 Celebrating with peaceful times  
 The restless elders  
 Whose sons returned safe.  
 Rejoiced are women now that  
 Their other halves returned safe.  
 You, too, are delighted  
 As the fire of war is put out.

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<sup>154</sup> In a different source, Ashyraaly compares Osmonkul's performance to a shower of rain: 'Finally, it was Osmonkul's turn. The songs he sang were pouring like a shower of rain. All of the people, including me, enjoyed Osmonkul's never-ending improvisation' (Alagushov 2008).

Meeting with those toiling the soil,  
 And advising the young,  
 You hearten the peasants.  
 Supporting them with your words,  
 Warning people with your tongue,  
 No bliss to the lazy, you implore,  
 'Work! You returned to your people,  
 Safe and sound from the war'.

(pp. 242-3)

The master poet sang a long response to this young poet in which he praised his poetry, offered him his advice and blessings and expressed his joy at seeing such young poets as Ashyraaly, who would soon replace the older ones. The ritual greeting of the master poet and his new apprentice came to an end with the following lines from Osmonkul:

Our times are advanced,  
 All the people are literate.  
 Every one of them is  
 Skilled in his endeavour.

(p. 243)

As Ashyraaly's narrative of that night draws to a close, he mentions how Osmonkul's performance went on well into the night: '... he continued his performance with the singing of a legend-song called *Kara Eshen*<sup>155</sup> until sunrise (*tan atganacha*)<sup>156</sup>. As he sang *Kara Eshen*, while some of the audience members were weeping, other were left speechless' (Toktobekov 2010: 28-29).

First, Ashyraaly's narrative is typical of oral poets' informal gatherings with local people, where their performances bring together elements of the official discourse *and* songs of the older period, merging the Soviet 'modern' with the Kyrgyz 'traditional'. For example, phrases such as 'the arrival of peaceful times', 'putting out the fire of war', 'heartening the peasants', 'no bliss to the lazy', 'our times are advanced' and 'all the people are literate' explicitly acknowledge the great benefits resulting from the modernizing policies of state socialism. Relying on his traditional authority, social capital and reformed status as a culture worker, Osmonkul continues to offer advice, which does not contradict but even complement, the socialist ideology. On the other hand, he also sings in various oral traditions that had been removed from their repertoire, their performance thus being officially

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<sup>155</sup> A legend song.

<sup>156</sup> *Tan atganacha*, or 'until sunrise', is a phrase used to refer to gatherings which continue well into the night.

forbidden. Such performances gave the locals a break from the realm of the official, and the oral poets and the audience meet much as they would have done in pre-revolutionary settings. Ashyraaly's description of Osmonkul's performance of a legend song and the reaction of the audience recalls Vansina's characterization of the value of oral traditions for the people:

It is enough to have witnessed the guardians of oral traditions solemnly reciting the texts stored in their memory ... The listeners, motionless and intent, follow every word that is spoken, and there can be no doubt that to them these words bring the past back to life, for they are venerable words that provide the key to the storehouse of wisdom of the ancestors who worked, loved, and suffered in times gone by. There can be no doubt that to them oral traditions are a source of knowledge about the past (Vansina 1965: xi).

Similarly, I suggest that, while offstage performances are not counter-revolutionary, they offer a sense of cultural continuity with the pre-revolutionary era. Such informal occasions were not exceptional, and, as I shall discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, their occurrence alongside the onstage performances points to a process of multiple modernity at work, even at the height of Stalinism. I do not claim that the impact of the revolution did not reach the rural Kyrgyz or that they experienced no break with the past in the Soviet era. However, what I do suggest because of this account is that, while a cultural revolution was taking place, as the official language emphasized, we also observe the existence of a more dynamic and multifaceted interaction between the state and the society.

### ***Bringing the 'Ancestral Voice' Back in: Kalyk Akiyev's Trips to his Native Region***

'It is our task to collect and work on the oral traditions with moral messages that circulate among the people ... We can enrich our literature only by writing down and sending [to the necessary authorities] interesting and pleasant expressions and poetry existing among the masses'. These words from the Kyrgyz folklorist Sharshenbek Ümötaaliyev, author of *The Heritage of Kalyk*, were published in the literary journal *Kyrgyz Madaniyaty* in June 1979. The article is based on oral historical accounts the folklorist collected from local populations during a business trip to the Jungal region of Naryn province as the head of a group of writers from the Writers' Union. Sharshenbek, who was conducting research on the famous master oral poet Kalyk and is from the same region, met the head of the Workers' Union of the Kōkömeren *sovkhov*, Kooman Kydyraliev, who had served as the chairman of two *kolkhozy* previously, a veteran with prestigious medals who

had travelled to Moscow three times for All-Union Agricultural Exhibitions. A respectable *aksakal* in his late fifties, Kooman was known throughout the region because of his close connection with oral poet Kalyk, who had been good friends with Kooman's father. Thus, in his article, Sharshenbek retells Kooman's narratives about Kalyk.

One event reported by Kooman took place in the autumn of 1943, when Kalyk visited the Döngüröme *kolkhoz* of the Kabak village administration. The head of the village council and the chairman of the *kolkhoz* welcomed the poet warmly in the village, and Kalyk was hosted that day at the house of the *kolkhoz* chairman. The chairman told Kalyk that, because of a drought, a poor harvest and locust attacks on their crops, the local population was suffering food shortages. Moreover, since all adult males were at the front, the labour force was made up of only the elderly, women and children, who were at the same time collecting money and warm clothes to send to the front. The chairman of the *kolkhoz* implored Kalyk to sing to the villagers, who were experiencing very difficult times. After the whole village gathered,

After greeting his audience, Kalyk started his performance in which he sang about our army driving back the enemies, that Soviet people were close to victory, and later, he sang *Kurmanbek*, *Janysh-Baiysh*, *Kedeikan*, *aitysh* of Esenaman and Jenijok, as well as many other epics. The village people who cherished his performance were quite entertained (Ümötaliyev 1979: 12).

The second account Kooman told about this poet featured the latter's visit to their village in October 1944. The poet was invited to the village by the head of the village administration, but had difficulty finding him at home, so he decided to visit Kooman. When the poet arrived at Kooman's house, both Kooman and his wife were surprised at this unexpected visit by such an honourable guest. They quickly slaughtered a sheep and prepared some food to be consumed before a bigger meal arrived. For the occasion, Kooman invited all the villagers, including the head of the *sovkhoz*, and they sat together over a large feast. When Kalyk began to perform, he greeted the people who had gathered, teased the village head for not meeting him when he arrived at the village and thanked Kooman for his hospitality:

As father Manas says,  
 'One day showing its fore,  
 Turning its back the next day,  
 The life [earth] is passing by'.  
 No one has reached  
 The bottom of the earth.

Dear Kooman,  
 A guest like me  
 Will not stop by every day. (p. 243)

Although the head of the village administration apologized to the poet, the latter kept to his plan to stay overnight at Kooman's house. Well into the night,

Kalyk entertained [*könül achuu*] the people who had gathered by singing different songs of his, performing the *aitysh* of Esenaman and Jenijok, and reciting the epics of Kurmanbek and Kedeykan. It was like a big concert of its own at which those who were suffering from the hardships of the war forgot about their anxieties and concerns. The elderly present among the audience offered their prayers to Kalyk, and the people left afterwards (Ümötaliyev 1979: 12).

The last account Kooman narrated dates back to the period of the collectivization of land in the late 1920s. The central committee of the party sent Kalyk to the Jungal region to talk the local people into founding a collective farm. Kalyk arrived in the region, gathered the people together and told them of the necessity to create a *kolkhoz* on which the land and animals would be redistributed among the people. However, 'under the influence of the propaganda of accomplices of *bais* and *manaps*, the people declined Kalyk's recommendation to form a *kolkhoz*'. Having been rejected by the people of his region, Kalyk was offended, and sang as follows:

Small Jegat, big Jegat,  
 A deep valley in between.  
 Whenever one sees it,  
 One wishes to run afar.  
 Twelve various tongues speak,  
 O brothers,  
 Superior to you is a wheatear! (p. 243)

As Kalyk ended his performance, 'many of the locals, fearing that the master oral poet of their region would leave broken hearted', expressed their willingness to be part of the prospective *kolkhoz*, and they 'formed the Boston-Kayin *kolkhoz*. It is now renamed *Örnök*'.<sup>157</sup>

The accounts related in this section are qualitatively different from those discussed in the previous section in that they are based on oral history and were published by a folklorist in a literary journal during the Soviet era.

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<sup>157</sup> *Jegat* in the lines above is the name of a nomadic encampment. *Chakchygai* or 'Isabelline wheatear' is a bird that lives in the steppe and open countryside, breeding in central Eurasia.

Thus, they are significant as informal history, not only because of what they imply about the times the performances took place, in the late 1920s and early 1940s, but also about the time when these accounts were published and circulated nationally, i.e. the late 1970s. In all three accounts, Kalyk appears as an influential oral poet whose art is held dear by the people of his native region. The setting of his performances brings together the local administrators and the people, while his songs blend the messages of the party with the legends of the old times.

In the first account, it is not clear whether Kalyk was officially invited to the village or merely paid a random visit during one of his travels in the region with his ensemble. As mentioned in the previous chapter, oral poets were particularly mobile during World War II both across the country and at the front, preaching a gospel of impending victory.<sup>158</sup> However, regardless of the reasons behind his visit, the poet, at the request of the chairman of the *kolkhoz*, raises the spirit of the locals by praising the achievements of the Soviet army, and his performance continues with the singing of the classics of Kyrgyz oral traditions, the performance of which would be unthinkable at onstage performances.<sup>159</sup> In the second account, it is clear that Kalyk was summoned to the village through a special request by the head of the village administration. During his performance, Kalyk makes a direct reference to the hero Manas and his epic, which was strictly forbidden at onstage performances. If oral poets praised any individual on stage, those could only be heroes of the October Revolution, heroes of socialist labour or *stakhanovits*, or martyrs and veterans of World War II. Any reference to 'Manas' as the 'father' had already been replaced by 'Lenin' and 'Stalin' by the 1920s and 1930s. In this piece of poetry, however, we not only see Manas referenced as a father figure coming back on stage, but also read the following lines from the epic: 'One day showing its fore, turning its back the next day, life [the earth] is passing by'. For the audience listening to these lines, this was a reference not only to the Manas epic, but also to the ancestral wisdom in trying to come to terms with the passing of time, mortality, etc. As a classic quality of improvised oral poetry, Kalyk, while thanking his host, brings the old and the new, entertainment and education, together. The last account related in the article dates back to the heydays of sedentarization and collectivization of Kyrgyz land.<sup>160</sup> Here, the poet was sent to his native region to convince the local population of the benefits of

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<sup>158</sup> 'Musa Baetov', Personal file of Musa Baetov, December 1977. TsGAKR f. 2753, op. 1.

<sup>159</sup> This is especially the case with regard to the classic *aitysh* of Jenijok and Esenaman, an account of which can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>160</sup> See Loring (2008) for the daring reaction of the northern Kyrgyz tribes to the collectivization campaign in its early stages.



following the policies of the party, as often happened in the early decades of the Soviet era, discussed in the previous chapter. The power of the poet's performance, according to the folklorist's narrative, overshadows the influence of the local enemies of the collectivization, the *bais* and *manaps*.

For a number of reasons, it is highly likely that these oral testimonies are genuine. First, the official archival documents discussed earlier in the chapter reproved the oral poets for gathering with the local population after their concerts, where they sing 'fairy tales', implicitly evidence for the truthfulness of the informal historical accounts summarized above. Secondly, the main task of the poets during the war years was to boost the belief of the suffering masses that the Soviet army was close to victory. As a result, the poets went beyond the demands of their concert plans and even performed in hospitals. Thirdly, we also know from the official documents that the administration of the Philharmonics received petitions from the local bureaucrats in which they requested more frequent oral poetry performances due to the high impact of oral poetry on local residents. Lastly, as I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, it is in these unofficial accounts that offstage performances are elaborated and through which Soviet-era oral poets are commemorated in the post-Soviet era. Thus, I suggest that these accounts provide us with a glimpse of both 'lived' and 'remembered' history, which accords with the official history of oral poetry in the Soviet era.

Moving beyond the question of authenticity, it is equally important that these alternative historical accounts were published and distributed nationwide as early as the 1970s. The question then arises of the importance of the article as a historical document of its time. What does publishing oral historical accounts in the article suggest about the state of Kyrgyz traditional arts and culture in the late Soviet era? How did the strict language of the collectivization of the arts in the 1930s evolve in the more mature years of state socialism so that unsanctioned performances could be talked about as 'heritage'?<sup>161</sup> What are the ideological shifts underlined in the article, the subject matter of which is the era of high Stalinism? The article supports several important arguments which are at the heart of the present chapter. First of all, the article makes evident the party's continuing interest in promoting the role of oral poets among the Kyrgyz in the late Soviet era. Secondly, the authoritative language of the collectivization of the arts, repeatedly emphasized in official documents and the press, fades away some decades afterwards, as the accounts of Kalyk's travels to his native region

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<sup>161</sup> It is important to note that oral poetry performances were not only reinvented Soviet-style, but Soviet-era performances are also called, explicitly, a 'heritage'. For a discussion of the 'uses of heritage' and how heritage is made, see Smith (2006) and Bendix (2009).

contrast with his official tasks. Regardless of whether or not it concerns the wrongdoing of a socialist cultural worker, the press published such information, which also implied that the oral poets of the time were given tacit permission to mingle with the local populations of the regions and sing for them without any restrictions. Finally, this article, published more than two decades after the poet's death, praised the poet's efforts in easing the sufferings of the rural Kyrgyz during difficult times. While it reflects the oral poet's endorsement of the socialist ideology, with a reference to his performances having both socialist and traditional content, the article suggests that, instead of being an entirely party initiative, the idea of socialist modernity was attained through a process of collaborative construction with the active and effective participation of its constituents.

### ***Expeditions of the Writers' Union***

My final account of offstage performances comes from the descriptions of Süyünbai Eraliev (1921-2016), a Kyrgyz poet and writer who went on a fifteen-day business trip to rural Kyrgyzstan in the autumn of 1958, together with a group of poets and writers from Writers' Union, among whom was the famous oral poet Alymkul Üsönbayev. These expeditions by the Writers' Union usually had two main goals. First, in their works, i.e. poetry, novels and dramas, the writers had to explore socialist realist themes, while proletarian art had to draw on the actual lives of the farmers and peasants. Secondly, part of the writers' job was to inspire hard work among the rural Kyrgyz through reading and poetry sessions.

Similarly, the aim of the trip was to meet with rural Kyrgyz at culture houses and clubs after working hours to deliver speeches followed by short poetry recitations:

Our duty was to say a few words and end the meetings with short poetry recitals. When it comes to *Alyke* [Alymkul], however, the people [audience] would not let him leave the stage. They kept asking him to sing various songs. We noticed this old man getting tired, but he never said 'no' to them. 'Fine, I do not want to upset you, now I will sing that one', he said, and continued after tuning his *komuz* (Eraliev 1973: 577-578).

As the villagers knew where the guests would be staying overnight, they flooded into the house where the group of writers would stay,

While some of us went to bed after dinner was over, *Alyke* was still up and singing. I awoke in the middle of night to hear him still performing. The people who had gathered were not tired at all; they went on cheering him all night. We thought he was tired and sleepless, but he did the same the following day and even after that.

We realized then that for him it was a pleasure, a festival to be among the people (Eraliev 1973: 578).

Although this event took place in 1958, Eraliev's account of it was only published in 1973, ten years after the poet's death. In fact, when the event told in the excerpt above took place, Alymkul himself was a parliamentary deputy, as well as a member of the Writers' Union; in other words, although a party official, he was breaking the official decrees. These alternative, quasi-official historical accounts suggest that the ambitious language of the party had its own limits and that it was continuously being negotiated, challenged and accommodated in various ways. They also indicate that, while the Soviet state was promoting a particular type of modernity through the language of onstage performances, it was simultaneously endorsing a state-sponsored traditionalism.



Plate 11. Alymkul Üsönbayev (centre, dictating his lines to his assistant on the left) with his colleagues from the Writers' Union at the Festival of Kyrgyz Literature and Arts in Moscow, 1958.

### **On the Discourse of 'State Sponsorship' in the Soviet Era**

From the early 1920s until the collapse of the Soviet Union, oral poets continued singing these and similar performances at the request of their audiences when they were off the socialist stage. Some of these performances were quite religious, while others were considered feudal, backward, nationalist and counter-revolutionary by the standards set by the

party. As the previous chapter demonstrates, the oral poets ensembles' very busy schedules while travelling across the country introducing socialist culture to rural Kyrgyz and advising them to act in accordance with socialist norms and values was certainly a strong component of the cultural revolution the party officials were fighting for. However, in the meantime, through the unofficial, offstage performances of the oral poets, the party was also sponsoring a sense of traditionalism among rural Kyrgyz. I argue that this state-sponsored traditionalism, however unintentional on the side of the party, provided a sense of cultural continuity, establishing a link between the old and new eras among the rural Kyrgyz. Moreover, as the alternative historical accounts became more visible in the press in the late Soviet era, the multiple histories these accounts provide were instrumental in promoting an understanding of a shared, collective construction of Soviet reality among the Kyrgyz.

The binary distinction between on- and off-stage performances is not an emic one; the local people do not mention that oral poets had a separate agenda onstage from their 'performing Kyrgyzness' offstage. However, while onstage performances were more sterile in their ideological content, offstage performances mixed socialist values with pre-revolutionary cultural elements. The systematization of oral poetry performances as socialist invented traditions and the programmatic employment of oral poets within the project of the cultural revolution gave way to unintended consequences, as the Kyrgyz consciousness inhabited this socialist project. After all, if oral poets were not assigned to the position of 'local allies', their performances across the country would draw more sustained reactions from the state apparatus. These cultural trips, made possible by the state, were appreciated by local populations interested in cultural continuity taking place side by side with the cultural revolution.

In order to highlight the involvement of the state in the creation and maintenance of nationalities according to Lenin's theory of 'good nationalism', the recent literature frames the Soviet nationality policy, though with different theoretical orientations, with concepts like compensatory nation-building, state-sponsored nationalism and state-sponsored evolution (cf. Verdery 1991; Slezkine 1994b; Hirsch 2000, 2005; Martin 2001). As 'nationhood' was considered the final stage before socialism as a sustainable system could be established, it had to be awakened, promoted and sponsored as a transitory phase, especially among those who did not have a nationalist sentiment. Francine Hirsch argues that Soviet administrators and experts were advocating:

a policy of 'state-sponsored evolutionism', exhorting Soviet leaders to give nationhood to feudal clans and tribes in order to push them along the imagined road to socialism. They characterized 'the nation' as a transitional stage on the evolutionary timeline, envisioning the mature Soviet Union as a socialist union of denationalized peoples (Hirsch 2000: 203).

Through a constellation of policies that included schooling, changes of alphabet and the 'mass production of books, journals, newspapers, movies, operas, museums [and] folk music ensembles' (Martin 2001: 1-2), the Soviet state stabilized and naturalized formerly fluid hybridities by giving each group a definitive history, territory, language and customs (Liu 2011: 118).

The cultural revolution, which reached its peak in the early 1930s, succeeded to the Soviet nationality policy, prioritizing the transformation of everyday life and the creation of new Soviet persons. As part of this massive project, oral poetry ensembles worked as educational and enlightenment institutions under the Philharmonics, with oral poets mobilized across the country, the scope and intensity of their work having been shown in the previous chapter. As the oral poets had to be promoted as local allies bridging the gap between the party and the people in the peripheries, they became national celebrities who were not only helping to revolutionize traditional cultural values for a socialist future, retrospectively they were also quite instrumental in sorting out the oral traditions of the pre-revolutionary era. Thus, oral poets ended up being one of the most prestigious and highest paid cultural workers, their performances frequently aired on radio and their poetry distributed in the newspapers, together with a picture of them in traditional clothes with medals covering their chests and a thick metal belt around their waists, looking quite different from other folk artists and cultural workers.

As this chapter has illustrated, however, the ambitious project of the cultural revolution was also instrumentalized by the locals. For them, the presence of oral poets in their region presented an occasion to perform their Kyrgyzness. Oral poets, who warned *kolkhoz* members against organizing extravagant festivals because they should discontinue such pre-revolutionary customs, were in fact the most honoured guests at such festivals, around which offstage performances would take place. Such unintended consequences of the cultural revolution reveal a striking parallel to Humphrey's 'manipulable resources' (1983). Just as 'the social system of accounting in Soviet farms lent itself to the possibility of creating manipulable resources' (Humphrey 1983: 199), in cultural terms, too, the way oral poetry performances were organized according to a central plan throughout Kyrgyzstan helped create possibilities for local improvisations to benefit from these performances in ways that were more appealing to them.

In cultural terms, although these offstage performances were surplus production, they were not detrimental to the agenda of the cultural revolution; quite the contrary, they complemented it. For local populations, they were instrumental in establishing relations of exchange between the socialist modernization project and local cultural traditions.



Plate 12. Estebes Tursunaliyev, national artist of the Kyrgyz SSR (and, later of the USSR), performing at Tchaikovsky Concert Hall at the celebrations dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Kyrgyz State Philharmonics named after Toktogul Satylganov. Moscow, 1986.

### **Conclusion: Domesticating the Cultural Revolution**

In this chapter, I have treated alternative historical accounts featuring offstage oral poetry performances as parallel transcripts of the cultural revolution in rural Kyrgyzstan. I further suggested that the structuring of oral poetry ensembles in the course of lengthy trips away from the capital city,

supplemented by traditional values of hospitality and respect for honoured guests among rural Kyrgyz, resulted in the domestication of the cultural revolution in the peripheries of the Soviet state. The unofficial historical accounts explored in this chapter, which are no less trustworthy than the official party documentation, point out that 'lived histories' have the potential to complicate the discourse of the Soviet modernization project in Central Asia.

The Kyrgyz experience under socialism confirms that in their actual implementation socialist programs varied enormously across the socialist space. This argument can be taken a step further to claim that even such varying socialist programs were constantly being appropriated by local populations unofficially whenever circumstances allowed. One of the anthropological implication of these local improvisations is the fragmentation of an imagined socialism into 'local socialisms' (Hann 1992), which suggests a variation with regard to official policies in different parts of state socialism and the ways in which these official policies are either sidestepped or further negotiated by local populations on the ground.

In contrast to the argument that the socialist experiment meant a revolutionary break with the past, I suggest that in some respects socialist policies 'sponsored' a sense of cultural continuity with the past, albeit without strong explicit intentions. Thus, state-sponsored traditionalism is an attempt to theorize a process in which, while Soviet state policies attempted to incorporate the traditional elements of local communities, such as oral poetry performances, as representative of a new proletarian culture built on an older tradition, for a more grounded socialism the same policies allowed local populations to convert the oral poets from 'cultural workers' into 'voices of the ancestors'. The use of the term 'traditionalism' here is not meant to essentialize traditions as unchanging and bounded or to see this as characteristic of Kyrgyz social life; on the contrary, it is chosen in order to refer to how they became an integral part of the modernizing project. In the words of Kandiyoti, 'what appeared to some commentators as "traditionalism" was as much a response to and creation of the system itself as a feature of local communities' (Kandiyoti 1996: 529). Thus, these traditional cultural performances became 'manipulable resources' permitting a dynamic interaction between the socialist modernization project and extant cultural resources from an earlier period.

The arguments put forward in this chapter do not contradict those presented in the previous chapter; quite the contrary, they complement each other while presenting us with a livelier picture in which cultural production in the Soviet era was not necessarily a one-way process. Official performances of the era contributed to the creation and maintenance of

collective identities and the foundation of a socialist morality. Unofficial, albeit state-sponsored performances, on the other hand, not only nurtured in the Kyrgyz a sense of cultural continuity with their pre-revolutionary past, they also helped the Kyrgyz redefine their socialist experience in the Soviet era. Equally importantly, the circulation of historical accounts of the Soviet-era oral poets, but not those of official performances, implies a sense of cultural intimacy the Kyrgyz felt towards their Soviet experience, while at the same time enabling them to relate to that period of history in ways that are more compatible with the growing nationalist sentiments of the independence era.

Through a cross-reading of multiple sources of historiography, whether they are party decrees, newspaper articles or oral traditions, we can come closer to 'actually existing socialism' and its local variations, as well as the ways in which these local variations were further appropriated by rural Kyrgyz. This dynamic relationship between modern and traditional, Soviet and local, is far from visible in the scholarship on folklore in the Soviet era since their analyses are caught between the party's language and folk literature, the songs, epics and poetry that had been doctored by the relevant bodies of the state, rather than seeing these oral traditions from a performative perspective and as occurrences and events taking place in a socio-political context that was not only given as top-down, but was also negotiated on the ground.





## ***Chapter 5***

### **Culture, Nation and Rituals of Rebellion in the Era of Independence**

Since the onset of the independence era, there has been a rapid expansion of oral poetry performances in Kyrgyzstan. Nowadays, in Bishkek, it is not uncommon to see children around the age of ten grab a *komuz* in their hands and rush off to the oral poetry school, *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu*, to attend training lessons with oral poets, where they practice improvisation and rhyming, and increase their proficiency in eloquent poetic language. When I interviewed students who had attended training seminars, they usually mumbled ‘I want to be an oral poet’ (*Akyn bolgum kelet*) and were not able to take the conversation any further. They followed the performances of the master oral poets on TV and radio, and also read the works of historical oral poets, thus gradually accumulating a repertoire of words and phrases which were considered both ‘heavy’ (*salmaktuu*) and ‘traditional’ (*salttuu*). Located on the second floor of a shabby building in central Bishkek, *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu* was founded by Sadyk Sher Niyaz, a businessman, director and a prominent public figure in Kyrgyzstan who owns a film production company. It is one of three private, non-profit oral poetry schools in the country, the other two being located in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad. When the school opened in 2001, older generation master oral poets such as Ashyraaly Aitaliyev (1927-2008), Estebe Tursunaliyev (1931-2005) and Tuuganbai Abdiyev (1937-2008) began training younger generations, now aged between 25 and 45, who in turn later started training their own students. Currently, student-poets aged between 10 and 20 are given a full day’s teaching and practice in improvisation, rhyming and repartee every ten days by their masters.

The one-room school bears no resemblance to a conservatoire or a proper music school. Instead, it has mutated into a meeting place between the student-poets and their masters. Without a proper curriculum or official regulations, the training seminars usually begin when the master poets arrive at the school. Next, the poet-teacher randomly selects the duelling teams,

putting one student against the other; the students then begin their performances, which are timed and later scored by the master poets.



Plate 13. At a training session, young poets improvise while a master poet (not in the picture) evaluates their performances.

Master poets occasionally provide a theme, a rhyme or a certain melody for the improvisation for the students to follow. Left to begin on their own, the students might start by improvising on the beautiful weather outside, a traffic jam on the road to school or the new hairstyle of one of their opponents. Although the music of the *komuz* and the pace of the improvisation and rhyming are important, it is the message in the performance that is of the greatest importance. Upon hearing his opponent's improvisation referring to his outfit that day, a ten-year-old poet may scold him with an unexpected philosophical depth, 'not every line that rhymes is poetry' (*ar bir uikash yr bolboit*). The dream of all these student-poets is one day to become a renowned oral poet of the people.



Plate 14. Young master oral poets Aaly Tutkuchev and Azamat Bolgonbayev, performing at the launching ceremony of a book.

As the material for this chapter began to develop, I found that my notes and observations bore a striking resemblance to the anthropological literature on the revival of indigenous cultural traditions, which are explored through diverse theoretical frameworks. In the former socialist countries, especially Kyrgyzstan, anthropologists have documented a growing tendency among local communities to search for alternative sources of collective identities by 'reclaiming the sacred' (Pelkmans 2006, 2009; Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva, and Toktogulova 2007; Kuchumkulova 2007; Montgomery 2007; McBrien 2008; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Isci 2010; Liu 2012), whether it be Christianity, Islam or the revival of ritual practices at large. A recourse to the 'deep past', i.e. a revival of interest in their pre-revolutionary history, customs and traditional kin networks, and the new role of elites following the collapse of the socialist order are being explored extensively (Hardenberg 2009; Trevisani 2010; Dubuisson 2017; Féaux 2017; Ismailbekova 2017). The dissolution of the Soviet Union and its political repercussions at the present day have also attracted scholarly attention (Hann and Pelkmans 2009; Reeves, Rasanayagam, and Beyer 2014; Reeves 2014a). Political actors too have fallen back on these tendencies as they provided the

new states with ideal toolboxes for the nascent nation-building process (Japarov 1999; Jacqueson 2010). This chapter is informed by this literature and shares certain similarities with their intellectual agendas. It also calls for a critical analysis of the phenomenon of revival in the post-Soviet context more generally.

The revival of Kyrgyz oral poetry could readily be classified as 'performing postsocialism' in the independence era. As I explored in previous chapters, however, these oral poetry performances are distinct from other conventional oral traditions, such as folk songs and epic poetry, by virtue of having no established form or canonized texts. Secondly, they are far from being a genre that simply relates a particular historical period or the feat of a mythical hero; on the contrary, they are improvisations about the present day and the broader social, economic and political contexts in which the performance takes place.

Questions arise, then, about the traditional quality of these oral poetry performances: how can the traditional be improvised, and how can an improvisational performance be considered traditional when its content is contemporary? Given that each and every performance of a single poet is a new composition on every occasion, how can we talk about it as traditional, as having been practised since 'time immemorial'? This discrepancy became even more apparent when I started to observe and record the oral poets' performances. In particular, the way in which the performances discussed among the Kyrgyz as an outstanding Kyrgyz tradition were reanimated in the present offered a stark contrast to how the poets improvised quite harsh criticisms of the social and political life of the country as they sang about the disturbing realities with which the Kyrgyz were having to struggle in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The main impetus of this chapter, then, is to address this discrepancy by explaining the seemingly opposed concepts of tradition and improvisation.

In elaborating on Kyrgyz oral poetry performances, I will also point to a degree of variation in post-Soviet nation-building processes in the broader Central Asian context, especially with regard to how independent states exercise power over their citizens through cultural production, as well as how the new political elites exploit their sponsorship of Kyrgyz cultural heritage. Laura Adams' monograph on Uzbekistan's national holiday celebrations documents how, through exclusive state sponsorship and control, the image of the Uzbek nation since independence is reproduced by staging the symbols of traditional Uzbek nationhood through Olympic-style spectacles to appeal both to local audiences and the 'imagined audience of global society', making them national and cosmopolitan concurrently: 'The Olympics are a tightly controlled, seemingly depoliticized arena for the

competition of nation-states, and the Uzbek government's choice of Olympics-style spectacle relates both to the state's need for control over cultural expression and to its desire to appear as if it was conforming to international models of nationhood' (Adams 2010: 85) – hence the term 'spectacular state'.

Although the Kazakhstani political elite's promotion of the nation's cultural heritage is equally political, it certainly is not as monological as the Olympic-style spectacles in Uzbekistan documented by Adams. Eva Marie Dubuisson's linguistic anthropological work on Kazakh *aitys* poetry, the closest regional literature to the theme of this work, documents how Kazakh nationalist sentiment is expressed through these oral poetic performances (Dubuisson 2010, 2014, 2017). Dubuisson demonstrates the path that Kazakh nationalism has followed through the language of the poets as anti-Soviet and anti-Russian in the era of independence. Despite the authoritarian environment of censorship and repression, she argues, sociopolitical critiques emerge in these performances in generalized and implicit ways.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, she refers to a combination of shifting dialogical relationships among ancestors, mentors, audiences, cultural organizers and sponsors of cultural production since independence: 'The complexities of relationships which inhere in the processes of folklorization and retraditionalization in Kazakhstan mean that definitions of culture are spaces of negotiation and contestation. As "Kazakh culture" is ultimately to be the face of the nation, there are many competing interests in what the content of that culture should be' (2010: 112). With regard to the future of this poetic tradition, she argues that the dialogical and collusive nature of these performances are in perpetual jeopardy due to decreasing state sponsorship of regional performances, a reduction in the number of private sponsors and a decline in the broader public's interest (2010: 112).

In this chapter, I argue that the distinctiveness of the Kyrgyz experience in the era of independence should be fully recognized. In Adams' work, the state promotes and controls cultural production single-handedly as the self-representation of Uzbekistan as a modern nation state with traditional Uzbek cultural values. On the other hand, elaborating on the state and private sponsorship of cultural performances, Dubuisson's work draws attention to both 'culture' as the national face of the independent state and its

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<sup>162</sup> It is important to realize the difference between the repressive environment of Kazakhstan compared to Kyrgyzstan, which is one of the most liberal of the former Soviet Central Asian republics. The ethnographic material in Dubuisson's works suggests the emergence of sociopolitical criticism through 'cultural permission' (2010: 107) and 'dialogic authority' (2014) in *aitys*. This applies to Kyrgyz *aitysh* as well. However, Kyrgyz poets proudly address the political elite in their presence, even the prime minister and incumbent president, by name, expressing severe criticism of their corrupt practices.

articulation with reference to the deep history of the Kazakhs, their religion, language, etc., as well as being in stark opposition to the nation's Soviet past and its Russian-friendly present. In the Kyrgyz case, however, oral poetry performances are distinctively a Kyrgyz conversation and are 'not a ritual for others'. As I will demonstrate in the final section of the chapter, for the poets, far from serving as the face of the nation, Kyrgyz national culture<sup>163</sup> has been 'in a coma for the last 23 years'.

Rather than performing 'culture' as the self-representation of the Kyrgyz nation, Kyrgyz oral poets sing their criticisms of the social and political problems of the nation *through* culture in the independence era. I suggest that 'culture' in independent Kyrgyzstan is performed, produced and sponsored in ways that are incompatible with the widespread discourse on nationalism in the formerly socialist Central Asian states. Rather, the language of the cultural performances I documented calls into question the very failures of the nation in the era of independence.

In the rest of this chapter, I document how, through these rather popular stage performances, 'culture' and 'nation' are debated in the era of post-Soviet independence. By paying closer attention to this particularly 'Kyrgyz conversation' and locating it within a broader social and political context, I will argue that these performances can be linked to classical anthropological theories, regardless of the quite different contexts in which they were originally formulated.

### **On the Revitalization of a Tradition**

I made my initial trip to Aral village, located in the Manas region in the northwestern province of Talas, in early September 2013, having been repeatedly advised by many oral poets to visit 'the village of the poets'. The village is famous among the Kyrgyz for the number of oral poets and Manas epic reciters who were born there, the most renowned being the Soviet-era oral poets Aлымкул Üsönbayev (1896-1963), his son Zamirbek Üsönbayev (1951-), Estebes Tursunaliyev (1931-2005), and more recently Abdyl da Nuraliyev (1955-) and Aaly Tutkuchev (1983-), as well as a number of Manas epic reciters. When I expressed my interest in *tökmö akynchylık*, a villager responded by saying, 'People search for [oral poets] in vain, but we have so many of them, that is the blessings of the Poet's Spring [*Yrchy Bulak*] and Goats' Mountain [*Echkili Too*]'. As I and a friend rode on

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<sup>163</sup> The word 'culture' translates as *madaniyat* in Kyrgyz, which is an Arabic loan word. As it is used today, *madaniyat* refers to 'national culture' with its roots in the Soviet formulation and maintenance of 'ethno-national cultures', rather than its direct English translation, 'civilization'.

horseback to the Poet's Spring, we were met there by the former director of the village museum<sup>164</sup>, who gave us a brief introduction to the 'holy place' or *mazar* (Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva, and Toktogulova 2007). The tradition of sipping water from the spring is said to have been started by oral poet Alymkul and Manas epic reciter Inash (1889-1971), who were both taken to the spring by another oral poet and orator Erkebai (1876-1930), who was from the same village. The tradition remains alive to this day, as parents take their little children to drink water from the spring in hopes that one day they too will become renowned poets.

The second sacred place near the village is Goats' Mountain, which is believed to be the place where relics of the epic hero Manas lay buried.<sup>165</sup> The villagers enthusiastically told me that some ten years ago a French researcher had come to the village to conduct research on the location of Manas' tomb. The villagers, although willing to offer guidance, cautioned her that it was not advisable to get too close to the holy site, as it might disturb the spirit of Manas. Nevertheless they set out together with her, and as they neared the assumed burial site of Manas the sunny weather darkened quite unexpectedly, followed by a strong hailstorm, which stopped them from going any further. The villagers interpreted the sudden and drastic change in the weather as a bad omen, and the expedition was cut short. The villagers believe that the spring and the mountain are both sources that bless the village, a belief that also explained the abundance of performers of revered oral traditions that came from this particular village. A similar language of enchantment resonated with my conversations with Kyrgyz on the revival of their oral poetry tradition.

In the following sections, I will set the scene for the ethnographic account of an oral poetry performance which constitutes the core material of the chapter.

### ***Inside the Philharmonics***

While the audience was slowly filling the Toktogul Satylganov Philharmonics' concert hall, I had already taken my seat in the front row and was making sure that all the equipment was in place and ready for the recording of what turned out to be a four-hour-long oral poetry competition.

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<sup>164</sup> Established in 1989, this was the village's last Soviet-era construction, sponsored by the local *sovkhos*. It was built as a result of the competition among the collective and state farms in the region. The museum was named after the Soviet-era oral poet Alymkul Üsönbayev and counts as one of the country's best ethnographic museums.

<sup>165</sup> In Sayakbai Karalaev's (1894-1971) variant of the Manas epic, the mythico-historical hero is said to have been buried in '*Echkili Too*' by his Tajik wife Kanykei. Some scholars have speculated that it could be the one in Aral village.



It was the second day of the competition; the first had taken place the previous day in the concert hall of KTRK, the national broadcasting channel. Only twelve of the 23 oral poets aged 18 to 60 who had performed the previous day had received pass scores from the jury allowing them to take part in the final competition on the second day. The jury comprised a famous oral poet, a businessman, a professor from the Academy of Sciences, the vice-rector of a state university, a renowned writer and a poet, both members of the Writers' Union, and the director of the national broadcasting channel.

According to the rules, each jury member gives a score of between 5 and 10 for each poet, and in the case of this competition, a poet can receive a maximum score of 70. The competition or poetry duelling takes the form of a tournament. The poets are matched randomly through a lottery at the beginning of the competition in front of the jury and the audience to avoid any accusations of match-fixing. However, the final round featuring the best four poets who duel for the top four prized places are matched according to the decision of the jury: usually the two poets with the higher scores duel for the grand prize and first place, the other two for the second and third places.

This *aitysh* concert was part of a larger anniversary event marking the 130th birthday of Korgol Dosuyev (1882-1962), a master oral poet and *komuz* player.<sup>166</sup> Also, the anniversary celebrations featured a two-day festival in the Toktogul region (the poet's hometown), during which a major horse race, a traditional horse game of *kök börü*, wrestling games and an opening ceremony of a museum dedicated to the life and works of the poet took place. Moreover, an anniversary spectacle was organized in the province's theatre; a collection of his works was printed in a thick volume, a conference was organized at the Academy of Sciences, local and national newspapers covered the events, and the *aitysh* concert and a horse race were aired several times on national TV channels. All the events for Korgol's anniversary celebrations were sponsored by the local elites, political figures and businessmen through NGOs established particularly for the anniversary. The poetry competition was sponsored by the then Minister of Energy and Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic, Artykbaev Osmonbek Mambetjanovich, who established the NGO '*Ak Fond*' as one of the anniversary organizations.

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<sup>166</sup> Although he passed away well into the Soviet era, he was not turned into a celebrity like many of his peers and apprentices. An immense body of folklore material was collected from him by ethnographers and folklorists in the 1930s. His grandchildren initiated the idea of the anniversary celebrations.



Plate 15. An *aitysh* dedicated to Korgol's anniversary, with twelve oral poets qualified to run for the second day of the poetry competition on the stage, just before they pick their numbers. Bishkek State Philharmonics, named after Toktogul Satylganov.

There was still half an hour to go until the event started when I found myself chatting with an old man (*aksakal*) in his late sixties, sitting on my right. 'I came here after a six-hour journey', he started. He was from the northwestern city of Talas and had travelled to Bishkek in order to watch the event live; he was due to return to Talas the following day, and was staying at his son's place in Bishkek overnight. 'I have never missed an *aitysh* concert in the last twenty years, I am not afraid of travelling long distances', he added. As we continued to talk, I asked his opinion about *tökmö akynchylыk*, which marked the beginning of a ten-minute seminar on the 'blessed tradition' of the Kyrgyz (*Kyrgyzdyn kasiettüü salty*). He began to recall the names of the master oral poets of the pre-revolutionary era and their influential role among the Kyrgyz. He leaped over the seven decades of the Soviet period and continued telling me more about the older generation of master poets of the independence era, many of whom had passed away some years ago, who had trained the younger generation he had come to see today. 'They are getting quite popular', I added, to which he responded, 'We are recovering, God-willing' (*onolup jatabyz, [Kudai] buyursa*).

Talk *about* the performances always included a set of terms with spiritual undertones, praising both the traditional and the improvisational quality of the performances: speaking of them as a blessed tradition (*kasiettüü salt*) and a ritual/ spiritual heritage (*ruhanii/ manaidyk muras*), singing ancestral words (*ata-babadan kalgan sözdör*), moral/ exemplary words (*nuskaly sözdör*), and the oral poets, with their pristine hearts/ inner worlds (*jürögü, ichki düinösü taza adam*), who are seen as receiving inspiration/ revelation (*ayan*). The literal meaning of *ayan* is revelation, and the phrase ‘God gives them revelations’ (*Kudai ayan beret*) communicates the ease with which oral poets improvise during their performances, which could go as fast as five or six times the pace of a regular speech. If I were to confront, or even implicitly criticize, their descriptions, I would often be riddled with all sorts of questions for which I would usually fail to provide a convincing response.<sup>167</sup>

This case of post-Soviet enchantment through orality was particularly appealing to me, and initially I often got carried away with the dazzling language in which these performances were described to me. Having observed many such performances, at times I felt overwhelmed by both the poets’ elegant use of poetic language, which they composed spontaneously, and by their calmness while performing, as if they were reading their lines from a teleprompter. As the fieldworker, I continuously found myself spellbound, as if embedded in an enchanted world while filming the event. Nevertheless, having been incessantly exposed to this talk about enchantment and to the glorious language and vocabulary attached to the performances for the first two and a half months of my fieldwork, I soon grew weary of it. I began to search for alternative explanations for the revitalization of the tradition I was documenting.

### ***Intangible Cultural Heritage***

*Tökmö akynchlyk*, I thought, was yet another tradition through whose expansion the Kyrgyz were responding to the collapse of the previous economic, political and moral order, and with it, the Soviet parameters by means of which the Kyrgyz had come to define themselves, the world they lived in and the ways in which they were defined by others. Emerging as an independent nation state in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic was suddenly redefined as a Cold War victory showcase by both Western political

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<sup>167</sup> Many Kyrgyz I interviewed would usually contrast oral poetry skills with the skill needed to write poetry, and the following is a typical reaction to my implicit criticisms from a taxi driver: ‘I can also write poetry, it’s a matter of time. I sit with pen and paper, I can rhyme well too, why is it difficult? Can you improvise poetry? You see!’ Conversation with a driver, Aral village, 01.06.2014.

scientists and enthusiastic Kyrgyz political actors eager to find a respectable place in the international community. The promotion of a discourse of cultural revival following seven decades of socialist rule fuelled this enthusiasm and was in line with the prescribed teleological transition into becoming a Western-like democracy with rapid market-led reforms.

Thus, the Kyrgyz found themselves thrust into the intangible cultural heritage industry, claiming a place on the UNESCO list for their indigenous traditions within the last decade. In 2008, the inscription 'Art of the *Akyns*' was added to UNESCO's world intangible culture heritage list, together with 'Kyrgyz epic tellers' in the title. Although the word *akyn* was in the project's title, the description of Kyrgyz cultural heritage referred only to the Kyrgyz epic tradition and the epic tellers:

The art of the Akyns, the Kyrgyz epic tellers, combines singing, improvisation and musical composition. The epics are performed at religious and private festivities, seasonal ceremonies and national holidays and have survived over the centuries by oral transmission. The value of the Kyrgyz epics lies largely in their dramatic plots and philosophical underpinnings. They represent an oral encyclopedia of Kyrgyz social values, cultural knowledge and history. The pre-eminent Kyrgyz epic is the 1000-year-old Manas trilogy, which is noteworthy not only for its great length (sixteen times longer than Homer's Iliad and Odyssey), but also for its rich content. Blending fact and legend, the Manas immortalizes important events in Kyrgyz's [*sic*] history since the ninth century.<sup>168</sup>

In addition to the epic, *Nowruz*, the spring new year, was inscribed in 2009, 'Art of traditional felt carpets' in 2012 and yurts as a 'Turkic nomadic dwelling' in 2014. While in the field in 2013, I was astonished to hear the inscription of 'Kyrgyz epic trilogy: *Manas*, *Semetey*, *Seytek*' for a second time. I soon realized that this was due mainly to the political reverberations of what most Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan considered a scandalous inscription of 'Manas' into the heritage list as Chinese cultural heritage, or, better put, that of the Kyrgyz ethnic minority in China in 2009.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Quotation from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-akyns-kyrgyz-epic-tellers-00065>, last accessed 14 March 2021. There is no single textual or archaeological evidence for the epic's 1000th year-old history, which was nevertheless celebrated as one of the biggest cultural events of the independence era in 1995. Note that a similar reference to 'deep history' was also made regarding the antiquity of the Kyrgyz state, with lavish celebrations of the '2200th Anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood' being held in 2003. Earlier, in 2000, the 3000th anniversary of the city of Osh was celebrated based on archaeological findings.

<sup>169</sup> See Coşkun (2018) for a broader discussion Kyrgyz cultural heritage and UNESCO politics.

The marketing of heritage is also noticeable in *Akyns and Manaschis: Creators and Keepers of the Kyrgyz People Spiritual Culture* [sic.] (Asankanov and Bekmukhamedova 1999), a book funded by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program). Published in Kyrgyz, Russian and English, the book introduces Kyrgyzstan's traditional oral heritage and the significance of its historical development to its readers. The book was developed with the assistance of a UNDP grant under the slogan 'UN ideas and "Manas" epic', and is dedicated by the authors 'As a tribute to our memory'. The preface to the English section of the book reads:

Oral authors' poetry, represented by creativity of a number of wonderful folk akyns, has also widely developed together with epic tradition in the artistic heritage of the Kyrgyz people... At the same time their creativity is distinguished by a concrete philosophical idea and each poet's individual vision of the world, [and the] rising social-moral problems of their epoch. Oral lyrics of the poets-akyns are also of an interest for comparison with creativity of great poets and thinkers of the world literature. In this respect their poetry, as well as the narrator's creativity, gives us the lessons of cultural heritage in achievement of the nonstop mankind human development [sic] (1999: 65).

Pre-revolutionary oral poets were praised for their role in transmitting cultural norms and values and their works with regard to philosophical values and moral lessons in the education of the nomadic Kyrgyz. Soviet-era oral poets, conversely, were celebrated for their performances singing about the themes of love and friendship, solidarity and peace, the equality of the rights of man and woman, the superiority of the educated over the ignorant, etc. They were acclaimed in the book for promoting patriotism, for following the didactic genre of the pre-revolutionary poets and for their performances in the category of the 'good/ moral man' (*jakshy adam*): an individual who is diligent, respects elders, esteems friendship, provides for his family, defends his country and values science (Asankanov and Bekmukhamedova 1999: 29). The themes of Soviet-era performances that are promoted by the UNDP project endorsing global humanistic values for the purposes of receiving international recognition in the heritage industry are actually those which were part of the educational and enlightenment institutions of the socialist modernization project.<sup>170</sup> Although many Kyrgyz I interviewed do not mention their master oral poets having served the party in the Soviet era,

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<sup>170</sup> 'In 1997 the UNDP allotted US \$150,000 for a related project entitled "Support for Manaschis and Akyns" to fund the training of the bards who traditionally recite the epics. UNESCO also continues to partially fund two organizations for the promotion of the epos set up at the time of the Manas celebrations ...' (Thompson 2004: 380).

their performances were nevertheless promoted in distinct ways in order to attract the interests of international donors and the heritage industry.

### *Recording the Performance*

Returning to my conversation with the *aksakal* in the concert hall, a second man sitting on my left, who appeared to be in his late forties, suddenly interrupted us; he had apparently been eavesdropping on our conversation for some time. 'Why don't you take our pictures?' he asked, after seeing several cameras in my hands. 'I am not a journalist', I said, 'and not a photographer; I do not print pictures for others'. This was the beginning of yet another conversation, and this time, turning to my left, I explained to him who I was and what I was doing there. 'We and the Kazakhs alone have this art/ talent of *tökmö akynchylyk*', the man said, and asked, a bit stunned, 'What will you write about this tradition?'<sup>171</sup> Many of my recordings were frequently interrupted by audience members who inquired why I was recording if I was not a journalist. It was not until then that I became fully aware of my positionality as a fieldworker, recording a performance that was not intended for 'others'.

The Kyrgyz in general are quite used to the presence of foreigners in the country, from NGO workers and Peace Corps volunteers to missionaries from various denominations and simply tourists who visit the country. Folk music concerts and ethno-national musical instruments, folkloric re-enactments, folk dances, performances of epic poetry, etc. are marketed successfully for touristic consumption. Regardless of how much the Kyrgyz pride themselves in the ancient tradition of *tökmö akynchylyk*, the presence of foreigners at these performances looks a bit odd, to say the least, as these occasions are considered an internal dialogue among just the Kyrgyz. They are not considered to be a ritual for others, nor a means of representing the Kyrgyz to outsiders. Rather, for the Kyrgyz, a poetry performance is an event, a form of collective behaviour that creates and maintains social solidarity within the community, a stage performance where an oral poet enters into a dialogue with his rival, as well as the audience, through his improvisations on the social, political and economic conditions of their society in general.

As an outsider who was recording a distinctively 'Kyrgyz conversation', however, I was not observing a display of cultural heritage, but rather an intimate dialogue between a poet and his audience, especially

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<sup>171</sup> 'Bul tökmölük önörü Kazakhtarda gana bizde bar'. I heard this exact sentence so many times that I tried to explain, in vain, that poetry duels existed among quite a number of peoples across the world as well.

when a young oral poet began to sing solemnly about the present conditions in which the Kyrgyz people were struggling and levelling harsh criticisms at specific political figures, even when they were in the audience, thus calling into question the glorifications expressed in the discourse of the great Kyrgyz nation.<sup>172</sup> The performance I had been preparing to record in the concert hall of the Philharmonics was a perfect example of one such occasion.

### **The Staging of ‘Public Opinion’, or the Ventriloquist’s Dummy**

There are two intrinsic qualities of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances, which collectively allow oral poets a degree of immunity while performing on stage. First, it is a popular and old tradition that speculatively dates back to the court of Genghis Khan in the well-known mythical account told in Chapter 2.<sup>173</sup> The Kyrgyz frequently make reference to this mythical account to suggest that oral poets’ eloquent use of language saves them even from the wrath of their rulers. A well-known Kyrgyz proverb also reflects the role of oral poets in the social and political history of the Kyrgyz: ‘There is no death to the messenger and the poet’ (*Elchi menen yrchyga ölüm jok*). Although the occurrence of this mythical account cannot be confirmed historically, the roles of the master oral poets of the pre-revolutionary era in their communities (1800s to 1920s) have been elaborately documented through oral historical accounts collected at mass folkloric expeditions in the early twentieth century, as discussed earlier. Thus, the immunity of the poets has become a taboo among the Kyrgyz due to its ancient roots, as well as its pre-revolutionary history. For these reasons, oral poets enjoy a great deal of freedom in their performances in the independence era, unless they have other concerns.<sup>174</sup> According to tradition, an oral poet can only be made to ‘shut up’ by another oral poet who, as his rival in a poetry duel, performs better.

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<sup>172</sup> Indeed, my observations that this proud cultural heritage is not a ritual for others but an internal dialogue, a ‘Kyrgyz conversation’ bear a striking resemblance to Herzfeld’s concept of cultural intimacy, ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality...’ (Herzfeld 1997: 3).

<sup>173</sup> It is the Kyrgyz themselves who essentialize the historicity of Kyrgyzness as an ethnic category eight centuries back.

<sup>174</sup> By this, I am referring to the issue of sponsorship for the oral poetry competitions and the invitations oral poets receive from the wider public for a performance on diverse occasions when an oral poet performs for five to ten minutes at the beginning and is rewarded handsomely.

Secondly, immunity is granted to poets when they are on stage because of their ability to detach themselves from their performances by using three unique strategies. First, they use an oratorical form of language that mainly references proverbs, sayings and historical events while singing about a contemporary topic.<sup>175</sup> Next, oral poets use their status as ‘the poets of the people’ (*eldin yrchysy*) quite strategically, claiming that they are in fact singing about public opinion, not their own words, while performing on the stage. They refer to a broad and blurry category of ‘the people’ (*el*), which, in the era of independence, includes a large number of disadvantaged people living in poverty, suffering from injustice, accusing politicians of corruption etc.<sup>176</sup> In every given performance, an oral poet can refer to ‘the people’ and get away with his criticisms of, in some cases, the country’s top politicians.<sup>177</sup> Lastly, a very common strategy elicited by the oral poets in detaching themselves from the performance is to blame the temporality of the improvisation. They say, ‘I sing the things I see and I hear’ (*görgönümdü, ukkanymdy yrdaimyn*). Although this appears to contradict the two previous strategies, in fact it does not. The same oral poets who endorsed Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s presidential candidacy in 2005 by actively taking part in protests that led to the ousting of Askar Akayev, the first president, today unanimously sing condemnations of Bakiyev, the second president, who was similarly ousted after popular protests in 2010. When I asked, in the middle of a conversation, whether this was not a contradiction, one of the poets said: ‘How could we have known that he would be worse than the first one?’

The use of proverbs, aphorisms and historical events, which are well established in the collective memory of the Kyrgyz, in Bloch’s words, ‘removes the authority and the event from the speaker himself so that he speaks when using formalization less and less for himself and more and more for his role’, by which the speaker rules out the possibility of disagreement from the audience, since ‘one cannot disagree with the right

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<sup>175</sup> Dubuisson (2014) also argues for the importance of the dialogical nature of the poetry duels, which grants a degree of immunity to Kazakh oral poets as well.

<sup>176</sup> Indeed, as Reeves notes, the popular phrase ‘We are with the people!’ (*Biz el menen!*) was the leitmotif of the popular demonstrations at the time of the revolution in 2010. It was a practical solution for business owners who, putting up the shutters, posted signs or painted the phrase on the shop windows to avoid the looters’ fury: ‘Shops, offices, and public space became covered, in the space of hours, in the leitmotif of this so-called “Tulip Revolution”: “we’re with the people!” – a sudden, dramatic affirmation of multitude in the face of the president’s ouster’ (Reeves 2014b: 205).

<sup>177</sup> I heard from three of my poet friends that they have occasionally received ‘threat calls’ following certain performances, but they stated that they had never been harmed, physically or otherwise.



order' (Bloch 1975: 16). In fact, the power of formalization in oratorical language not only rules out the possibility of disagreement, it also envisages a positive reception from the audience: 'by using such a code a "superior" can coerce the response of an "inferior" since the superior's speech act predicts the inferior's response', making the oratorical language a 'political tool' (Bloch 1975: 22). Similarly, 'timeless cultural truths', Bowen notes, uttered repeatedly by the performers of oratory, allow them to subordinate their voice to the voice of the age-old wisdom of the ancestors, which in turn empowers the voices of the poets (Bowen 1989: 15, 35). The metaphor of a ventriloquist's dummy well fits the process of oral poets maintaining their immunity while speaking truth to power.<sup>178</sup> However, the ventriloquial relationship here is not between the oral poets and their instrument, but between the poets, the tradition of oral poetry and the role of oral poets in Kyrgyz cultural history. Like the ventriloquist's dummy, oral poets manage to voice their sociopolitical criticisms while warding off the risks their words symbolize.

### *Azamat's Performance*

In the Philharmonics' concert hall, the audience broke into rapturous applause following the lead of an *aksakal*, who unexpectedly started to shout and applaud (a typical means of protest by the audience when the program schedule is not observed at public events like this), thus ending my conversation with the man on my left. The master of ceremonies stepped out from behind the curtains and apologized to the audience, saying that they were running half an hour late for technical reasons, and confirming that the competition would start shortly. Some minutes later, he returned to his place on the stage and welcomed the audience. Next, he invited Anatai Omurkanov (b. 1945), a poet and a writer, former head of Writers' Union of Kyrgyzstan and a prominent cultural worker (*madaniyatka emgek sindirgen ishmer*), and who on this occasion was serving as the head of the jury. Anatai gave a brief opening speech that underlined the importance of the evening's competition as part of the anniversary celebrations of the oral poet Korgol. Following his speech, the names of the twelve oral poets who had passed the previous day's competitions were announced. As they started appearing on the stage one by one, each made for a table in front of the stage to be given their tickets. Each selected a single ticket numbered from one to

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<sup>178</sup> Godelier (1986) uses the metaphor to explore the role sexuality plays in the social organization of the Baruya, especially with regard to the perpetuation of male dominance. More relevant examples come from the work of scholars of music and theatre: see for instance, Burrows (1987) and Auslander (2009).

twelve so that all twelve poets were matched randomly before the jury and the audience (this practice also determines the schedule of the tournament). As the audience was familiar with all the poets, the cheers of encouragement for particular poets grew louder, while others commented enthusiastically on how poet A would have no chance against poet B, etc.

Azamat Bolgonbayev (b. 1983), who was one of the first I met and interviewed in the field, was matched against Bayan Akmatov (b. 1987), a young and very talented poet. At that time, Azamat, who had fifteen years of experience performing on stage, was both the head of the oral poetry school in Bishkek, where he supervised the activities of teaching and the practice of younger oral poets, and one of the three oral poets employed at the state Philharmonics' section of folk poets. Almost always in a sombre mood, Azamat gave me the impression of a person who was far more serious than his peers. During our first meeting, I observed that he was entirely immersed in his own talent as a well-known oral poet, who, regardless of his age, was a highly esteemed public figure. He was one of the two oral poets who appeared on KTRK with a performance in attempts to calm down the protestors who were involved in looting businesses and other criminal activities at the time of popular protests, which led to a revolution in 2010. He defined the role of an oral poet as follows:

[Traditionally] Oral poets observed the events taking place in their communities and commented on them. If in a country, or a particular society, or a region – let's say – injustices take place, wrong practices which would harm the people, or practices which would spread unrest and divisions among the people, for instance, the poet sings them out and conveys the truth to the people. The people were educated as such, restored order, tidied up their errors and corrected their ill practices.<sup>179</sup>

Azamat, together with his fellow oral poets, was convinced that oral poetry performances must address the problems of society or 'the people', which unsurprisingly makes them entirely political. This specific element is one of the reasons why oral poetry performances in the independence era touch on issues of poverty, the lack of proper public services, the widespread corruption, ethnic clashes, the chaotic influx of Western influences through business, education, NGOs and missionaries, etc. To sum up, all the ills that society faces are explicitly linked to the impotence of their rulers, for which their lyrics hold the politicians responsible. Thus, these stage performances serve as the ideal platform on which the poets, while taking a break from duelling with their rivals, can voice their criticisms of social and political

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<sup>179</sup> Interview, Bishkek, 27 August 2013.

conditions in the country, which are heard by all segments of the public because of the extensive media coverage.

Carrying two *komuz* in his hand<sup>180</sup>, Azamat walked to the centre of the stage and stood next to Bayan, where both poets jointly greeted the audience. As the poets took their seats, Azamat brought out his Kazakh *komuz*, fine-tuned it by softly strumming its strings, and the performance started. His first few lines were reserved for the audience, singing ritual greetings and blessings for the Kyrgyz nation and in turn asking for their prayers. After uttering some lines to his rival, he suggested, '*Bayanym* [my Bayan], let's continue the great tradition of our ancestors', which marked the beginning of a thirty-minute, entirely political performance. He first made a reference to the cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz, acknowledging the great master poets of the earlier eras, like Toktogul, Eshmambet and Barpy, all of who are well-known by the public. Next, he called for respect for the *Manas* singers, *akyns* and *komuz* players living among the people, asking 'Do not bow down to the gold underneath; instead, respect the gold that is walking the earth' (referring to 'the people'), which was followed by a round of applause from the audience.

Even though Kamila Taliyeva, the Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, was among the audience that day, she was the first target Azamat chose to admonish in his opening performance:

First among the rulers, Kamila eje,  
Are you back from your pilgrimage?  
Appealing to the Creator with good wishes,  
Did you convey the concerns, sorrows of the Kyrgyz?  
Hearing there the words of the honourable,  
Did you keep it in heart, respectfully?  
For the distress of Kyrgyz, did you weep?  
And implored God who witnesses it?  
Or, did you just admire the beauty of Mecca,  
And returned from there as a tourist?

(pp. 243-4)

In the first ten lines of his performance, Azamat stared squarely into her eyes and questioned Kamila about her recent pilgrimage to Mecca, asking

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<sup>180</sup> One tuned for singing the Kyrgyz way, sung faster and with seven-syllable lines. The other *komuz* is tuned to sing the Kazakh way, performed slower and with eleven-syllable lines. Kyrgyz praise their performances as *kyska*, *nuska* (short and wise). When Azamat wants to sing about politics, he picks up his Kazakh *komuz*: performing more slowly and in a grave tone, he skilfully creates a mystical ambiance, also allowing the audience more time to grasp every single line of poetry.

whether she had sincerely implored God to alleviate the distress of the Kyrgyz and wept for divine help for the problems with which her fellow citizens were struggling, or whether she simply enjoyed her trip to the Holy Land as a tourist, neglecting her own people back home. At the end of these ten lines, the audience burst into an applause lasting 22 seconds, whistling and cheering the poet on the stage as if he was interpreting the very feelings in their hearts.<sup>181</sup>

Following these rather powerful lines, Azamat maintained his attacks on politicians in general, contrasting them with the poets, a common strategy poets use to promote their own status:

Poets uphold the people's honour,  
Rulers only suffer their ends.  
Poets know the truth by heart,  
Rulers know how to shatter it.  
(*a lady cries, Bravo!*)  
One is not a poet if he cannot  
Burn people's heart with reality?  
Indeed, what a nation are we?  
Our own gold, we can't share!  
Rulers, too, take after them,  
Devouring the joy of their people.  
Blind to Kyrgyz's great path, and,  
Eating up the honour in their chest.  
How can we call them true rulers?  
None has attended to these *aitysh*!  
(*19 seconds of applause*)  
Your evening is filled with poetry,  
'Foreigners' and those recently moved abroad,  
All the bosses approached our president,  
All offering Atambaev their big money.  
All returned as minister, official or whatever,  
To the White House<sup>182</sup>, only three years later.  
When did the ruler(s) of Kyrgyz consider (if at all),  
The wisdom (of those) who sing the reality of the people? (p. 244)

<sup>181</sup> The reader can appreciate the performance, its setting and the reaction of the audience better by watching a section of this performance which is uploaded online with English subtitles: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj-C\\_-7DqaU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj-C_-7DqaU), last accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>182</sup> 'White House' or in Kyrgyz 'Ak Üy' refers to Kyrgyzstan's presidential palace. The building's exterior is covered in white marble, hence the reference.

The fact that the words for politicians (*akimder*) and poets (*akyndar*) rhyme in the Kyrgyz language further increases their frequency of use in such performances in that the poets refer to politicians as individuals belonging to a corrupt category as opposed to the poets, who are depicted as representatives of 'the people' with clean hearts, free from corruption. However, even though the poets present themselves as the representatives of the people, this does not prevent them from holding the people themselves accountable, at least partially, for the mistakes of the politicians. This point is explicitly made when Azamat sings out a protest: 'Indeed, what a nation are we, our own gold we can't share [amongst ourselves]', to conclude that the rulers were imitating the people.<sup>183</sup> As the epitome of the corrupt politicians, Azamat mentions Askar Akayev (who settled in Russia after his ousting) as 'a foreigner' and Kurmanbek Bakiyev (who moved to Belarus following the 2010 revolutions) as one who has 'recently moved abroad', and he finally directs his words to Almazbek Atambaev, then president, who is thought to have taken 'big money' from politicians who had served under previous corrupt administrations and wanted to return to Parliament as a deputy or minister. Here too, the audience burst into clapping and cheering when Azamat referred again to the traditional authority of the poets and asks, 'When did the ruler(s) of the Kyrgyz consider the wisdom (of those) who sing about the reality of the Kyrgyz?' At the end of his initial performance, which took six minutes in all, Azamat sang six additional lines to his rival, upon which Bayan began his performance.

Bayan's first few lines joked about how he thought Azamat had forgotten about him, which made Azamat smile and the audience chuckle. However, he said he knew why Azamat was sad, wishing he would be happy again once his people were happy. His performance was a little more reassuring about life continuing, and he expressed his hopes for the Kyrgyz, adding that he actually wanted to sing about Korgol that day and warned Azamat, 'Elder brother, let's do not forget the theme'. As he started praising Korgol, he sang about what Korgol was most famous for:

Not afraid of Stalin; he was  
The nightingale of the Kyrgyz.

(p. 244)

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<sup>183</sup> Kyrgyz have rich reserves of gold, which are being mined by foreign investors. Kumtor is the largest gold mine, established in 1992, located in Issyk-Kul province and run by a Canadian company. Since 1992 many political figures have had to face allegations of corruption related to the gold-mining company. The Kyrgyz state's shares fell from 67% in 1992 to 15% in 2004, went back up to 33% in 2009, while negotiations to raise it to 50% were still going on at the time of my fieldwork.

Indeed, while Korgol is famous among the folklorists for his immense contributions to campaigns to collect folklore materials in the early decades of the Soviet era, he is more widely known among the Kyrgyz for his entertaining performances and for having allegedly sung the following lines:

We are Stalinist poets,  
We are close to Stalin,  
Stalin, we only sing,  
We are Stalin's mistress. (p. 244)

In the introduction of the book dedicated to Korgol, which was compiled for the anniversary celebrations of the poet, the authors expound upon these lines, claiming that Korgol 'openly sang these lines about the poisonous, rotten politics of his time, rather than taking to his corner frightened, upon which he was fired from the Philharmonics [i.e. from his employment]', (Ondosheva and Batyrkulova 2013: 7). However, the authors' statement is not convincing, for reasons already discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. First, in the era of high Stalinism, poetry performances were so heavily censured that some poets were persecuted even for their ideologically incorrect 'choice of tenses' at their performances. Secondly, the book includes many performances by Korgol, who endorses the policies of the Soviet state and advises his apprentices to work for the state. An account by one of his students is an example of such an endorsement (Ondosheva and Batyrkulova 2013: 329-337). I speculate that he might have uttered the lines above in one of his 'entertaining' offstage performances, which were probably heard by the party officials, upon which he must have lost his job.

Azamat continued his performance, replying only very briefly to Bayan and advising him to follow in the footsteps of Korgol, which was what Azamat himself was doing that very evening. Following these remarks, Azamat resumed his attacks on Deputy Taliyeva; however, this time he did so more mildly and professionally, referring to her capacity as the country's representative for social affairs. Next, he levelled three different complaints at Bishkek's then city mayor, Isa Ömürkulov, regarding his wasteful expenditure of the city's budget on short-lived flowers (*adnorazoviy güldör*), how he boasts about his skills in management while only one road is repaired each year, and his indifference to Kyrgyz values by permitting Russian to be used, instead of Kyrgyz, on the electronic advertising billboards in the centre of what is the country's capital city.

I am back to you Kamila eje, (*laughter and claps*)  
We can never reach you time and again.

Those around you, so-called secretaries,  
 We can never bypass those gorgeous ladies.  
 As Isa Ömürkulov told us,  
 Bishkek is blossoming ever more.  
 Covering my city, Bishkek all over,  
 Blooming flowers only short-lived. (*applause*)  
 Piecing together one road a year, he says,  
 'Well, we constructed a road, you see?'  
 (*whistles, shouting, applause*)  
 With their songs, the poets of the Kyrgyz,  
 We build roads across the word (*cheers, applause*)  
 'We live in Kyrgyzstan, O, my Kyrgyz,  
 Know your own language', the poets caution.  
 Electronic advertising boards in the city centre,  
 How come they are written in Russian?  
 (*Bravo-master of ceremony, whistles, applause*)  
 The poets telling the truth, right?  
 Also right that some are clutching at straws?  
 Technology that all the world depends on,  
 How come the Kyrgyz language does not fit? (p. 245)

Following his addressing Deputy Taliyeva and the mayor of Bishkek by name, in the final section of his performance Azamat went on to express harsh criticism of politicians in general, also referencing the Minister of Culture, who was not present at the event, but instead sent his deputy. Juxtaposing the 'white *kalpak* people' (*Ak-kalpak*) with their false representatives in the 'White House', who dress in 'white suits', he accused the politicians of being incessantly greedy, concerned only for their pockets, while forgetting about their own people, and asked, 'Where on earth is the Minister of Culture', (*Madaniyat ministiri kaida jüröt?*), who, instead of attending an important cultural event dedicated to a prominent master oral poet, sent 'a young woman' (*kelin*) in his place. Azamat ended his performance by addressing the Deputy Minister of Culture, who was among the audience, requesting, 'To your chief, pass my greetings, and say "the poets smeared you anyway"'.

Singing about the White-kalpak Kyrgyz,  
 The poets' mouth is generous to them.  
 Putting on their white suits, fidgeting, (*chuckles*)  
 Inside the White House is the remedy (for some).  
 Neglecting the White-kalpak Kyrgyz people,

Money is their only friend.  
 When there is an *aitysh* for Korgol here,  
 Where on earth is the Minister of Culture?  
 (20 seconds of applause)  
 When I see the people in front of me,  
 My heart in my chest is like a bird.  
 (You are the real son of the people!)  
 A Goliath of Kyrgyz people united here,  
 Twelve poets of the Kyrgyz improvise,  
 [Minister of Culture] sends a bride/ girl in his place:  
 (laughter, shouting, applause)  
 I don't know your name, my sister.  
 You know, oral poetry is noble for the people.  
 As the poets here proudly sing,  
 You came to celebrate our evening.  
 To your chief, pass my greeting, and say,  
 'The poets smeared you, anyway!'  
 (You are the outstanding son of the Kyrgyz!)

(pp. 245-6)

Bayan respectfully followed Azamat's advice that he should go in the footsteps of Korgol and began to sing his poetry to the melody of *Ak Bakai*, a piece originally composed by Korgol. Afterwards, he playfully criticized Azamat for performing in the Kazakh style, which produced a roar of applause and cheering from the audience. Looking straight into Azamat's face, he slightly reproached him that he had not received any answers to his questions and that he might as well have not come on the stage, since they had not had a proper poetry duel:

I purified the *komuz*,  
 I fine-tuned it, as well.  
 When there is the melody of Ak Bakai,  
 Why would I sing in the Kazakh style?  
 (a storm of applause)  
 Your words would be honey, pouring down,  
 An omen for important days to come,  
 I did not get a reply to my questions,  
 Brother, I might as well not have come.  
 (a storm of applause)

(p. 246)

Indeed, Azamat had not engaged in a duel *per se* with his rival poet on the stage that evening, but rather decided to wage war directly on the Kyrgyz



politicians, starting with the Deputy Prime Minister, the mayor, previous presidents, and so forth. Nevertheless, in the eyes of both the audience and the jury, who knew Korgol's story, previously mentioned, all too well, Azamat's performance was properly devoted to the theme of that evening, as it strongly resembled Korgol's alleged performance when he mocked Stalin's repression, speaking out against the authorities when political conditions grew too unbearable.

### *The Voice of the Audience*

Azamat and Bayan's duel was the first performance in the first round of the four-hour tournament. Azamat scored a maximum of seventy points (ten points from each member of the jury) for this performance, the highest score of the entire tournament. In fact, while he did not engage in a duel with Bayan, Azamat's performance was dialogical in other ways: a dialogue between himself and the audience by staging 'public opinion' and giving a voice to 'the people', as well as a dialogue with Kyrgyzstan's political leaders by harshly criticizing them for their personal and political practices (cf. Dubuisson 2017). Of his fifteen-minute performance on stage, his dialogue with Bayan lasted approximately four minutes. Although the jury's assessment of the performance focused on its linguistic, literary and artistic aspects with respect to the quality of the dialogue between the poets, i.e. the duelling aspect of the performance, the audience's voice cannot be ignored, so it counted equally when jury members prepared the final results.<sup>184</sup>

Azamat engaged in two more poetry duels that evening. In the second round, his opponent, a young poet of nineteen years and his apprentice, praised his master's performance in the previous round, adding that his words would be remembered forever, even if he were exiled to Siberia for being critical of the government. For the audience, this was an obvious reference to Korgol's master, Toktogul, who was exiled to a labour camp in Siberia. Thus, both the audience and jury members likened Azamat's performance to the lives of Toktogul and Korgol. They associated Azamat with Toktogul because of his resistance to the feudal and colonial powers, and with Korgol for his mocking Stalin's oppression. Thus, Azamat's performance debasing the politicians of the independence era was received as a great success.

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<sup>184</sup> The response of the audience to the jury's assessment can at times be really harsh, as in the case of a regional festival that took place three weeks before this performance in Talas, where, for ideological reasons, the jury poorly scored a wonderful performance in the final match and a group of thirty policemen had great difficulty in preventing the crowd from approaching the members of the jury. This event will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

I watched the entire performance from the front row of the concert hall. Prior to the performance, I had positioned the video camera on the raised platform just at the edge of the stage. Throughout the performance, I juggled a small notebook and pen in one hand with another camera in the other, taking pictures of the poets and the audience. At the same time I was also enjoying the performance, and when the audience would break into a rapturous applause as Azamat solemnly sang, I too put down all my instruments in order to contribute to the cheers of encouragement. Azamat was not only staging public opinion as a poet in his traditional garment, but also, by constructing a particularly disturbing reality through his performance, he was contributing to the formation and shaping of public opinion. In return, as a performing artist on stage, he was further inspired to sing his critical remarks because of the way the audience could identify with him. This allowed Azamat to denounce the Minister of Culture publicly for not showing up, even though he himself was an employee of the state Philharmonics, which came under the Ministry of Culture.

To repeat my initial concerns expressed in the introduction to this chapter, as an anthropologist documenting this event using visual equipment while simultaneously noting down the enchantment in the air, I was trying to connect the two seemingly contrasting practices: first, the ways in which the Kyrgyz are taking pride in the revival of a tradition, which they feel so intimately linked to the representation of their voice in the independence era, and second, the ways in which the very performance, which was so much appreciated by the audience, in fact put on display the troubles of the nation.

The evening's oral poetry competition came to a close with a final performance. This performance was also the final match of the tournament and, rather surprisingly, the two finalists were again Azamat and Bayan.<sup>185</sup> In the end, Azamat won the grand prize against Bayan by 68 to 63.5. After the sponsors, organizers and jury members had seated themselves on the stage for the awards ceremony, all twelve poets were invited on to the stage to receive their awards.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> They performed against each other in the first round and were matched with other poets in the semi-finals. After receiving the highest scores, they were matched again as two finalists. As already explained, the process of matching is transparent, taking place before the jury, audience and cameras. The language of the 'finals' is an emic one.

<sup>186</sup> The total budget for the money prizes was 500,000 som (eq. €7,000). Four of the poets eliminated in the first round received 8,000 som (eq. €120); the next four poets eliminated in the second round received 12,000 som (eq. €180) together with badges and certificates of participation. For the top four poets: 3rd place 50,000 som (€750); 2nd 70,000 som (€1,000); 1st place, Bayan, 100,000 som (€1,500); and grand prize, Azamat, 200,000 som (eq. €3,000).



Plate 16. Deputy Prime Minister K. Taliyeva making her speech.

The ceremony reached its peak when Azamat's name was announced as the tournament's grand champion. It was Deputy Taliyeva, who was also the head of the organizing committee of the event, who was to present the award to Azamat. Before doing so, she was given time to speak:

As they say, 'If you do not say a word on its exact occasion, the father of the word dies'.<sup>187</sup> The Kyrgyz have an honourable saying, 'there is no death to the messenger and the poet'. My brother, Azamat, referred [to me] repeatedly for a while. I sat, with the grace of a mother, wholeheartedly wishing, 'May he get the first place, may he get the grand prize'. For that, I wish this young man observes the blessed art of improvised poetry in a blessed way, may his fortune be abundant... When the hearts of the Kyrgyz people and our ancestors were grimy and stained, they always listened to the poetry duels of the akyns... Azamat, may your talent excel; criticize the government, criticize their work, but do not touch somewhat

<sup>187</sup> 'Söz udulu kelgende aitbasa, sözdün atasy ölot'.

holy (blessed) things [*ancha myncha kasiettüü nerselerge tiyishbegin*], that is also a great talent.<sup>188</sup>

With the audience applauding loudly, she placed the badge on Azamat's chest and presented him with a certificate of attendance, together with an envelope containing the grand prize in cash. It was then Azamat's turn to say a few words:

One will not be exiled, God willing.<sup>189</sup> Taliyeva Kamila Abdyrazzakovna, of course, we respect, revere you as a woman, a mother, and a graceful daughter of the Kyrgyz. You are a person ruling the people [*bashchy*]. For that reason, as the poets, it is our obligation to say the word in our breasts, as you are the head of the people. We referred to you not as Kamila Abdyrazzakovna, [but] as the vice prime minister of the Kyrgyz, as a ruler of the Kyrgyz [*Kyrgyzdyn bashchysy katary*]. I think you will pass those words to the government of the Kyrgyz. May your pilgrimage be accepted, thank you again, one more time.<sup>190</sup>

This ethnographic account may very well suggest that the entire performance was a display of ritual hostility that was prearranged and that Azamat's critical remarks, the high scores and consequently the grand prize he received, as well as the ceremonial speech both he and Kamila gave, could be interpreted as part of a larger scenario. As I will discuss in the next section, the speeches made were merely common courtesy out respect for (and fear of) 'the people'. The audience welcomed both speeches as appropriate and continued to applaud both speakers loudly for some time as the event drew to a close.

## On a Tradition and Its Discontents

### *A Ritual of Rebellion?*

My initial frustrations with the glorious language attached to both the tradition and its revival had already taken a back seat to the anthropological implications of these performances in the independence era, of which Azamat's performance, as told in the previous ten pages, was a prime example. Seven decades of socialist modernization, coupled with 25 years of post-Soviet experience, should have already led to Weberian disenchantment among the Kyrgyz. However, the atmosphere inside the Philharmonics

<sup>188</sup> Referring to Azamat's remark on her pilgrimage. Having recently returned from pilgrimage, that evening Kamila was wearing a headscarf (in the Kyrgyz way), otherwise an unthinkable practice for a female politician in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>189</sup> Referring to the fate of Toktogul, of which his rival reminded him in the second round.

<sup>190</sup> Both excerpts are from transcriptions of my recordings of the event.

during such performances was more suggestive of a world that remained 'a great enchanted garden'.<sup>191</sup> First, a Durkhemian collective effervescence experienced by the audience was followed by cheers of encouragement with long periods of applause. Second, as the performance could be considered a functional source of social cohesion and solidarity, the audience was able to identify with 'the people'. I suggest this was achieved through ritual hostility and a ritual of rebellion, though with some reservations.

Azamat's performance has some similarities with Gluckman's theory of rituals of rebellion, which the latter developed with reference to the management of conflict in tribal African communities, in which he was inspired by Frazer's discussion of the ritual of the priest-king in *The Golden Bough* (1890). Gluckman discusses the rites of female rebellion in which Zulu women, who were in the care of fathers, brothers or husbands, were ascribed a dominant role, and men a subordinate role. Through such ceremonies of gender transgression, Gluckman argues, tensions and inequalities between men and women were revealed and resolved, and the social order was confirmed by ritually marking the boundaries of social norms and values. Gluckman also discusses a ceremony of ritual hostility in which he is publicly humiliated in songs full of hatred and rejection chanted by the members of the royal clan, upon which he flees into a sacred enclosure. Gluckman argues that the acting out of the conflicts emphasizes social cohesion and the ceremonial reversal of roles does not contradict the fact that neither the women nor the princes are opposed to the fundamental structures of their society, and the acting out of the conflict achieves 'social unity':

a most striking feature of their organization is the way in which they openly express social tensions; women have to assert license and dominance as against their formal subordination to men, princes have to behave to the king as if they covet the throne, and subjects openly state their resentment of authority. Hence I call them rituals of rebellion. I shall argue that these ritual rebellions proceed within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself. This allows for instituted protest, and in complex ways renews the unity of the system (2004: 112).<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> For Weber's discussion of disenchantment in a modernized and secularized Western society, in contrast to traditional societies as enchanted, magical gardens, see *The Sociology of Religion* (1963: 269-270).

<sup>192</sup> Schröter (2004) provides a rich summary of works criticizing Gluckman's theory, especially with regard to his neglect of 'antagonistic contradictions', while favouring only the ritual-ceremonial ones (Schröter 2004: 45). See also Schnepel (1990).

In oral poetry performances, a similar theme of the reversal of roles is also present. In the case of Azamat's performance, his invocation of the poets as the real representatives of the people is an apt example of this, even though 'the people' have democratically elected all the politicians he berates through his performance. Moreover, the ceremonial role he fulfils on stage is a perpetuation of an ancestral tradition that has to be revered by the politicians and people alike (he could not have made the same criticisms if he had been in her office without risking punishment). His openly stated resentment of authority also revealed the wider implications of the performance, enabling the audience to ventilate their own aggression.<sup>193</sup>

On the other hand, other relevant elements are missing, for instance, the purging of the emotions of pity, fear and inspiration for the politicians. This is an 'antagonistic contradiction' (Teeffelen 1978: 78), unlike the non-antagonistic contradiction that inspires the theory of rituals of rebellion. There is a crucial aspect to Azamat's performance, which, though very pertinent, cannot be considered a ritual rebellion *per se* because the poetry performances as such are not instituted events that are promoted by the politicians who are the objects of ritual hostility in these performances, regardless of the fact that Deputy Prime Minister Taliyeva was the head of the organizing committee for the event. Poets will not replace politicians in the way that Swazi princes would replace the king, and this is exactly the point where the sponsorship behind these performances steps in. In what follows, I will present a well-rounded picture, which has still to emerge from the ethnography.

First of all, Kamila Taliyeva took office as Deputy Prime Minister in 2012, and at the time of the anniversary celebrations, in October 2013, she was still in office. However, while in office she was conducting a public relations campaign to be the next Minister of Culture, this being the main motivation behind her serving as the head of the organizing committee of that evening's poetry competition. She was successful in her attempts, being appointed Minister of Culture on 4 April 2014, which created a great deal of dissatisfaction among the so-called 'cultural workers'. On the day of her appointment as Minister of Culture, a group of cultural workers, 'young activists of civilization' as they called themselves, organized a press conference under the title 'National culture: is it necessary for the state?' Moreover, they also cautioned the relevant authorities that if their voices were not heard, they would arrange 'civilized protests' through performing

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<sup>193</sup> For Gluckman's and Durkheim's respective discussions of the functions of ritual hostility and deviance as reinstating cultural norms and values, as well as redefining the moral boundaries of a given society (anomie, crime and deviation), see Durkheim (1997); on Eskimo song duels and their functions, see Gluckman (1965).

arts.<sup>194</sup> Three weeks after this press conference, on 24 April, they staged their first protest in the form of a symbolic public mourning. Although the young cultural workers were sincere in their complaints about the lack of state sponsorship for national culture, both the press conference and the symbolic funeral mourning were strongly endorsed by Sadyk Sher Niyaz, and Azamat played a prominent role in their organization.

Following a series of protests by the cultural workers employed by the Ministry and pressure from the media, Kamila Taliyeva was removed from office in September 2014. Following her removal, I was not at all surprised to hear the name Sadyk Sher-Niyaz being mentioned as one of the five candidates nominated for the minister's post. In fact, four years previously he had been selected to serve as a member of the advisory council of the interim president and later as the interim Minister of Culture for a year when a provisional government took office in the aftermath of the 2010 revolutions. More importantly, Sadyk was the founder of the oral poetry school, *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu*, which he has not only funded for the last fifteen years, he has also sponsored countless oral poetry performances throughout Kyrgyzstan since 2001. Azamat, who at the time of the performance was the head of the oral poetry school, was just one of many oral poets in the younger generation who were trained at this school, all of whom were deeply indebted to Sadyk's initiation of the poetry school. Regardless of his high qualifications, however, Sadyk was not appointed to the post of Minister of Culture after Taliyeva's resignation on the grounds that a close relative of his was already in the parliament (his elder brother). In short, although Deputy Prime Minister Kamila Taliyeva was the head of the organizing committee for the poetry event, she and Azamat had nothing in common. Thus, Azamat's performance was not a 'tactical' or ritual rebellion which had been prearranged with Deputy Taliyeva. Nevertheless, it did not overshadow the impact of Sadyk's political interests on Azamat's performance. Through combinations of multiple motivations mentioned above, Azamat exploited the oral poet's immunity to launch his attacks on a number of high-ranking officials and politicians in general. At the same time, the audience relished the thought of witnessing the revival of a tradition, which they regarded as one of the signs that their community was recovering in the era of independence.

At the end of his Frazer Lecture (1952), Gluckman asks, among other questions, whether rituals of rebellion are effective only for the period of their performance and shortly afterwards. He surely did not have Central Asia in mind when he called for comparative research to acquire a full

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<sup>194</sup> Both the press conference and the symbolic mourning will be explored in detail in Chapter 6.

understanding of the phenomena. Actually, the repercussions of the staged rebellion (or, in the words of Teeffelen (1978), the antagonistic contradiction) against the Deputy Prime Minister only made themselves felt *after* the performance, resulting in the resignation of Kamila Taliyeva from the post of Minister of Culture.

### **Conclusion: An Intimate Tradition**

The invention of traditions, their remaking and mutability across time and space, has been widely discussed in the literature (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). With regard specifically to the Soviet era, Lane (1981) explored similar phenomena in her examination of how invented socialist rituals were utilized in the legitimization of political rule. Binns (1979, 1980) examined official Soviet ceremonial events as an instrument and reflection of social change. These works explore the practices of rites and ceremonies with a focus on their novelty, continuity and change within a spectrum of possibilities. Indeed, the discourse of 'invented tradition' contradicts local perceptions that secular state traditions, life-cycle rituals, folk traditions and other cultural phenomena represent unchanging survivals from 'time immemorial'. While oral poetry performances are highly valued for similar reasons and their supposed antiquity is a matter of pride among the Kyrgyz, the temporality of the free-fall improvisation poses a challenge.

In the era of independence, the value and pride attached to performances and the celebration of their revival are a total contrast to what is being sung by the poets on stage. As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, although the *aitysh* audience and many Kyrgyz I interviewed talked to me enthusiastically about these performances, they struggled to explain mainly two aspects of this tradition. First, when I inquired about the Soviet-era history of Kyrgyz oral poetry, I was often told only about the offstage poetry performances. All the oral poets of the socialist era have become ancestors in the post-Soviet era, and their anniversaries are celebrated nationwide. However, the fact that they were the poets of the party is silenced in all the accounts surrounding them.

Secondly, in the post-Soviet era, when poets voice the sorrows and sufferings of the Kyrgyz on stage, the glorious language of the revival fades away. As I, the researcher of a proud 'cultural heritage' and a foreigner, recorded performances like that I describe above, I was often asked why I was not instead recording recitations of the heroic epics, which were more reflective of the self-representation of the Kyrgyz in the independence era, rather than these improvisations on everyday life. For reasons explained already, discussing the Soviet-era and some present-day performances of poetry means, for many Kyrgyz, revealing the nation's troubles.



In comparison with the regional literature mentioned in the introduction, the ethnographic materials discussed in this chapter reveal a contrast with the ideal role of ‘culture’ as the face of the nation.<sup>195</sup> In performances of *tökmö akynchylyk*, ‘culture’ is not tasked with representing the nation, but rather with consolidating it by means of a recovery in the country’s social and political circumstances.

This chapter has highlighted the crucial role that Kyrgyz oral poets and their performances have played in the formation of public opinion in the long-term history of the Kyrgyz. Irrespective of the various roles they played in different historical periods and their new positions as members of a local traditional system of checks and balances in the chaotic post-Soviet era, oral poets among the Kyrgyz have been part and parcel of the moral landscape of their times. For the Kyrgyz improvisation is their tradition, which, as I have argued, has been intimately linked to the processes and practices of creating and maintaining collective identities across a century marked by transformations.

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<sup>195</sup> Both Dubuisson (2010: 112) and Adams (2010: 142-143) use the ‘face’ metaphor for ‘culture’, as the ‘face of the nation’ and the ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ face of the nation respectively.

## ***Chapter 6***

### **The Post-Soviet Nationality Question**

In late October 2013, an oral poetry competition dedicated to the anniversaries of two prominent Kazakh warriors from the nineteenth century was held in Uzyn Agash village, located in Jambul province, Almaty, Kazakhstan. In order to advertise the poetry competition as an ‘international event’, the organizers invited Jenishbek Jumakadyr, then 38-year-old Kyrgyz oral poet. Moreover, to make the event even more international, an invitation was extended to Böribai Orazymbetov, an oral poet who is an ethnic Kazakh born and raised in Uzbekistan, but who later migrated to Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, he was labelled either a local or an international poet in Kazakhstan, depending on the context. Although I had attended similar poetry events in Kyrgyzstan at which Kazakh oral poets performed, this was my first time at a similar competition in Kazakhstan. Jenishbek and I drove together on the three-hour trip across the border. The organizers of the event provided us with accommodation in a guesthouse near the village and invited us to a feast that had been prepared for the oral poets who would be competing in the afternoon’s event. Following the feast, we arrived at the village’s house of culture, where the poetry event took place. After Jenishbek’s performance, Böribai took the stage with another Kazakh poet. Following the initial greetings reserved for the audience, Böribai’s opponent asked him a question about the conditions for Kazakhs living in Uzbekistan. Böribai replied to his opponent asking if he really wanted to hear the realities, upon which he started in a rather grim tone that Kazakhs in Uzbekistan were living in utterly poor conditions, and they were wondering why the Kazakh state had not yet repatriated them, provided them with citizenship rights, etc. Before he could finish his lines, the head of the jury stood up, stopped his performance and asked Böribai to leave the stage. This happened at around the fifth minute of a twenty-minute poetry duel, upon which Böribai slowly walked off the stage with a rather gloomy look on his face. When we talked about the behaviour of the jury following the event, Böribai replied, ‘Not the first [time], nor the last’, (*ne pervyi, ne poslednii*).

Indeed, this incident was the main topic of my conversation with Jenishbek on our way back to Bishkek, as I wanted to delve into the possible boundaries of freedom of speech, of what could and could not be sung by Kyrgyz oral poets on stage. When I speculated, 'such an act by the jury would simply be unimaginable in Kyrgyzstan', Jenishbek responded that he was not at all surprised by the jury's 'uncivilized behaviour', upon which he uttered a famous Kyrgyz proverb:

Don't you know, we have a proverb: 'You may behead one, yet not cut the tongue', (*bash kesmek bar, til kesmek jok*). This is not the case with Kazakhs. Kazakh poets cannot sing freely; similarly, if they happen to openly criticize their 'Nur Ata', their state, or other rulers, this is what happens. How we can sing freely, you have seen it yourself, no one can close the mouths of oral poets in Kyrgyzstan (*akyndyn oozun ech kim tyialbait*).

The rest of our conversation continued along similar lines, focusing on the authoritarian political climates in the neighbouring countries of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which have always been a matter of criticism for the Kyrgyz.

Indeed, the relatively flexible political climate in the country, which has been acknowledged as independent Kyrgyzstan's most valuable asset, has recently become quite central to internal debates on Kyrgyz statehood and national identity. In Kyrgyzstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the categories of 'nation' and 'statehood' have received an unprecedented amount of attention. It is as if most Kyrgyz have waited for the nation and the state to flourish on their own in the era of independence, just as these categories were constructed, maintained and sponsored under state socialism and were considered to be a 'given' by the Kyrgyz themselves.<sup>196</sup> However, the Kyrgyz experience of independence has been tainted by political instability due to revolutions, ethnic conflict, widespread poverty and ultimately a lack of effective state- and nation-building practices. The regional literature fails to recognize the distinctiveness of the Kyrgyz state and nation-building practices that provide such a contrast with other republics in the region. The administrations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (and Azerbaijan, for that matter) not only use the discourse of the Soviet state's promotion of the balance between ethnic particularism and

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<sup>196</sup> 'The "ideological space" in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a diversity of positions as well as actors. This is in contrast to what existed during Soviet times, when ideology was produced and disseminated by a set of central institutions under the control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In Kyrgyzstan since independence, there is no analogous centralized process or institutions' (Murzakulova and Schoeberlein 2009: 1233). See Adams (1999) for a contrasting analysis of nation-building in Uzbekistan.

Soviet internationalism (Slezkine 1994a; Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005) in the era of independence, they also build upon and replicate the nation-building practices of the preceding period of state socialism and its management of the nationality question (Kandiyoti 1996; Adams and Rustemova 2009; Adams 2010; Liu 2011). Alternatively, they also attempt to undo the Soviet legacy in ways that are reminiscent of the Soviet state's own politics (Grant 2014). In fact, even in the earliest days of the Central Asian republics winning independence, it was rightly suggested that these countries would pivot towards reviving their own cultures and traditions: 'Central Asians ... are determined to press for a revival of their national cultures, and they expect their national languages and religion to be favored in their republics' (Olcott 1993: 59). While these statements hold true for other republics in the region, I suggest that the Kyrgyz state diverged from these regional trends from the very beginning, which has not necessarily led to the country becoming a stable democracy (Anderson 1999; Kavalski 2010; Steimann 2011).<sup>197</sup>

Today, in the era of independence, most Kyrgyz fear that their state and the Kyrgyz nation are on the brink of extinction. I suggest that this fear results primarily from the discontinuation of the promotion of national identity, which had been created and maintained by the Soviet state and consolidated through a variety of large-scale techniques of domination and everyday politics. While the nation appears to be an alternative source of collective identity, the social, political and economic conditions of the country do not lead Kyrgyz to speak proudly of their national identity as it stands today. Instead, the frustration of nationalist sentiments in the present has led to a retreat into the nation's glorious 'deep past' that projects the 'prospective Kyrgyz nation' as a moral community. While a formerly repressed nomadic past and the customs and traditions associated with it are now glorified, and the vision of a prospective nation state is promoted, the present condition of the nation lacks rigid characterization.

This chapter introduces the concept of 'frustrated nationalism' to explain further the repercussions of Soviet-era nationality policies in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. I argue that more often than not the regional literature has focused on successful cases of nation-building practices which replicated the Soviet-style management of the 'nationality question'. Kyrgyzstan has

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<sup>197</sup> This theme is explored more broadly in Chapter 1, where I discuss the 'transition' literature on Kyrgyzstan, which frames the country's post-Soviet experience as promising from the perspective of Western policy-makers. The latter supported financial investments and moneylending to promote the country as the showcase of their victory in the Cold War, calling it a 'struggling democracy situated in a part of the world dominated by despots', 'the Switzerland of the East', '“an island of democracy” floating in a sea of authoritarian regimes', etc. See Olcott (1993, 1996), Anderson (1999) and Steimann (2011).

generally been left aside as an exception, overshadowed by the more strident nation-building politics of the other republics in the region.

### The Weak State

A presidential decree issued by Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambaev in January 2014 was quite provocative regarding how Kyrgyz national identity was being debated in the country. It would be unthinkable in other regional republics to hear a president declare openly the alarming conditions surrounding national identity:

Kyrgyz statehood is undergoing yet another era of hardship in its more than two thousand years of history. The decisive events that took place in the twentieth century afforded the Kyrgyz nation the possibility of founding its own independent state once again. Unfortunately, however, we lost more than we gained in the first twenty years of independence. Respect for the state's authority diminished, and the nation was robbed of its wealth by previously corrupt and criminal family-clan politics. In 2009, the Kyrgyz Republic was declared the poorest in the CIS countries [Commonwealth of Independent States]. Citizens' confidence in the state fell drastically, [and] the weakness of the Kyrgyz state, as well as the fear of its collapse, have recently been debated openly.<sup>198</sup>

The presidential decree from which the excerpt above is taken declared 2014 to be 'the year of strengthening statehood' (*mamlekettüülüktü bekemdö jylı*). It claimed that infighting among the Kyrgyz political elite, which had led to the collapse of the ancient Kyrgyz khanate, had been growing worse for some time in the country, making it a matter of national security and harming the unity and peace of the nation. The Kyrgyz president was not only referring to the two previously ousted presidents, the two colour revolutions or the recent ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks, but also to the ongoing 'clan' politics and regionalism exploited by the political elite for their personal political interests through clientalism and patronage networks, thus aggravating the political cleavage between the regions and between the north and south of the country (Olcott 1993; Collins 2006, 2011; Tudoroiu 2007; Gullette 2010a, 2010b; Ismailbekova 2017).<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, 'On the declaration of 2014 as the Year of Strengthening Statehood'. 29 January 2014, No. 17. <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/preview/ky-kg/61910/10?mode=tekst>, last accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>199</sup> Following a referendum in 2010, Kyrgyzstan became the first parliamentary democracy in the region, having suffered two corrupt administrations in which the respective presidents mobilized their presidential powers in their personal interests and those of their family and kin networks.

As part of a strategic five-year plan (2013-2017), in 2014 he urged that stricter measures be taken to delimit the borders definitively, advocating the unity of the nation and peaceful interethnic relations, and promoting the unifying role of the state language, improvements to the laws and the implementation of administrative, judicial and economic reforms, etc., lest the Kyrgyz state fell apart.

### ***National Culture in a Coma: ‘National Degradation’ and a Symbolic Funeral for madaniyat***

In April 2014, shortly after the presidential speech and the Kyrgyz government’s announcement of a long list of action plans as a response to it<sup>200</sup>, a group of cultural workers, ‘young activists of national culture’ (*jash madaniyat aktivistteri*)<sup>201</sup> comprising famous oral poets, playwrights and actors, among others, organized a press conference<sup>202</sup> under the title ‘National culture: is it necessary for the state?’ (*Mamleketke madaniyattyn keregi barby?*). The press conference, at which the young cultural workers were highly critical of the parliamentary government, confirmed the President’s remarks on the open debate over the weakness of the Kyrgyz state, especially in not implementing effective nation-building practices. The young cultural workers were critical of the new government’s complete silence on programs and policies directed at the preservation of national culture and the promotion of the Kyrgyz cultural heritage: less than 1% of the state budget was allocated to *madaniyat*, while according to the constitution it should have been 3%. All the coalition parties were fiercely debating which party should get the post of Ministry of Energy, or which ministry should be responsible for the airports, customs, etc. By contrast, the post of Minister of Culture was totally disregarded, and it was eventually offered to a former school teacher<sup>203</sup>, evidence of how little attention was being paid to the politics of national culture.

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<sup>200</sup> The list of action plans has eight sections listing a total of a hundred items: ‘Regarding the actions to implement the decree of the President of Kyrgyz Republic titled “Declaration of 2014 as the Year of Strengthening of Statehood” dated 29 January 2014’, 24 March 2014, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/preview/ky-kg/96270/30?mode=tekst>, last accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>201</sup> As already explained in Chapter 5, I translate *madaniyat* not as ‘civilization’ but as ‘national culture’ with reference to Soviet era politics of cultural management.

<sup>202</sup> For the link to the press conference, see <https://presscenter.akipress.org/news:24660>, last accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>203</sup> The new Minister of Culture was Kamila Taliyeva, featured in the final section of Chapter 5.

The press conference continued with oral poet Aaly Tutkuchev's remarks on the prominence of the works of 'national cultural workers':

When the sorrowful events took place on 7th April 2010, when we lost around ninety people ... and the people were unsettled and their movement was unstoppable, the president, prime minister, deputy, police, none was anywhere to be seen ... Only the cultural workers, with their Manas (epic recitations), with their oral poetry accompanied by *komuz*, could ease the anxieties of the people ... bring them to an end and restore peace.

Following Aaly, one of the speakers made the interesting remark namely that, 'For the last twenty-three years, it [Kyrgyz national culture] has been in a *coma*, still lying down, not being able to stand up'.<sup>204</sup> This was quite a strong remark to make, not only referencing the inability of the independent Kyrgyz state to care for the preservation and promotion of its national cultural institutions, but further implying something else for the earlier period, namely that Kyrgyz national culture had still been alive and well during the Soviet era.

In support of their statement that 'national culture is in a coma', the young cultural workers intensified their criticisms of the weakness of the independent state using the catchphrase '*uluttuk degradatsia*' (national degradation), a phrase that has recently become highly popularized in the country. 'National degradation' as used among the Kyrgyz is significant because it points to a downward trend in preserving and promoting the national values and symbols that are linked to Kyrgyz national identity, again with direct reference to the sponsorship of ethno-national identities in the Soviet era. As the press conference drew to a close, the young cultural workers cautioned the relevant authorities that if their voices were not heard, they would take to the streets to put on 'cultured protests' by performing art. Three weeks after the press conference, on 24th April, they staged their first protest in the form of a symbolic public mourning.<sup>205</sup>

This event involved symbolic mourning as in a funeral and was held in accordance with traditional Kyrgyz funeral rites. The 'mourners', consisting of cultural workers, marched from the state drama and theatre building to the parliament building in the capital. As they walked a distance of approximately two hundred and fifty metres at a slow pace, they pretended to be weeping and removing their tears with handkerchiefs in their hands, while lamenting loudly, 'Rest in peace, O poor *madaniyat!*' Indeed, the way in which Kyrgyz national identity is debated through 'national

<sup>204</sup> '[Kyrgyz madaniyaty] 23 jyl aralygynda komada jatyp, daghy da ele turalbai oshol boidan jatypatat'.

<sup>205</sup> See <http://www.azattyk.org/media/video/25360639.html>, last accessed 14 March 2021.

degradation', with statements about national culture being 'in a coma', followed by a symbolic 'funeral rite' matched the tragic tone of the presidential decree, suggesting that, while Kyrgyz national identity could be talked about either retrospectively or alternatively as part of a forward-looking national discourse, its present condition could only be met by silence.

### ***'National Identity' between 'Deep Past' and 'Imagined Future'***

The atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan resonates well with Humphrey's discussion of emerging nationalism in the Mongolian context. Humphrey argues that, following the collapse of state socialism in 1989, Mongolians turned to the past, which served as a moral authority in the present (Humphrey 1992: 375-376). With the demise of the Soviet Union, Mongolians were disillusioned with a vision of socialist morality and found themselves looking for alternative forms of collective identity, a Durkhemian moral order, trying to create 'a "true Mongolian" moral society' rooted in national identity. Although the 'deep past' is also being summoned up by Kyrgyz, there is confusion with regard to the 'immediate past' for both the general public and the political elite, as shown by a closer examination of the recent celebrations of the deep past and the officially sanctioned holidays. To start with, lavish celebrations were organized celebrating 'Manas 1000' in 1995, 'Osh 3000' in 2000 and the '2200th Year of Kyrgyz Statehood' in 2003.<sup>206</sup> Nevertheless, Kyrgyz still continue to celebrate annually the foundation of the first Kyrgyz government in 1936 in the Soviet era and the anniversary of its first constitution, as well as marking the anniversaries of several other state institutions. In fact, Kyrgyzstan was alone within the CIS for celebrating 7th November, a bank holiday, as the day of 'The Great October Socialist Revolution' at the time of my fieldwork.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, it was not until 2003 that the statue of Lenin, with his arm pointing towards the 'right path', was removed from the central Ala-Too square in the capital to the old

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<sup>206</sup> A similar reference to a deep past is also visible in the neighbouring countries. On the 660th anniversary of Amir Timur, see Adams and Rustemova 2009: 1271.

<sup>207</sup> A draft bill proposed by the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan having been approved, the first observance of 'The Great October Socialist Revolution' took place on 7 November, 2002. Since 2017, this holiday is celebrated for two days, on 7th and 8th November, with its new name 'Commemoration of History and Ancestors Days' (*Taryh jana ata-babalarydy eskerüü kündörü*).



square a few hundred metres away. In the southern city of Osh, on the other hand, Lenin's gigantic statue, erected in 1975, is still standing.<sup>208</sup>

These practices, I argue, imply a distinctive Kyrgyz experience of post-Soviet independence in comparison to practices in neighbouring countries and other widespread practices in the broader post-Soviet space. The literature on Central Asia points to the political elites' efforts to portray an 'independent nation' which is 'no longer post-Soviet', ranging from urban transformation projects (Manning 2009; Grant 2014; Laszczkowski 2016) to the politics of national identity and the promotion of titular languages (Akiner 1991; Fierman 1991; Dave 1996; Landau and Kellner-Heinkele 2001; Schendel and Zücher 2001; Garibova 2009; Cummings 2010).<sup>209</sup> Grant summarizes major post-Soviet changes in favour of the titular nations in their republics by invoking he calls the 'edifice complex':

Across the former USSR, one of the strongest visual indexes of all that has been wrought over the past twenty years – since socialism came to an end, and fifteen internal Soviet republics began new incarnations as independent states – has come in the dramatic transformation of urban landscapes. This is perhaps no more so than in capital cities, so regularly presented by governments and citizens alike as showcasing the face of a brave new world. The promotional message everywhere seems to be 'Think what you might of us before, but look at us now' (2014: 501-502).

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, however, I argue that this body of regional literature on post-Soviet nationalism could be misleading. Among the Kyrgyz, the Soviet-era designation of the nation as transitory (Slezkine 1991, 1994b) not only outlived the ultimate goal of Soviet internationalism, it also lay the foundations of a frustrated nationalism in the post-independence era. While nation-building was part of the socialist modernization project as a precondition for internationalization, the similar prospect of a nation state being fully integrated into the international community prevailed in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, not, this time, through the state sponsorship of socialism, but by 'surviving on foreign support' (Olcott 1996).

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<sup>208</sup> There have been calls to replace Lenin's gigantic statue in the central square in Osh, though no action had been taken at the time of writing. The city council is reluctant to move the statue, which has recently been put down to a lack of financial means.

<sup>209</sup> Grant citing the Azeri President Aliyev: 'We have long left the name of a post-Soviet country. We are not a post-Soviet country. When sometimes in meetings with foreign partners, they say "post-Soviet countries", and I say, "Wait. Azerbaijan is not a post-Soviet country. Perhaps some are post-Soviet countries, but we are not"' (2014: 503).

In what follows, I explore the place of the Kyrgyz oral poets and their performances in debates over Kyrgyz national identity in the era of independence. The ethnographic material for the rest of the chapter comes first, from an oral poetry competition held in Bishkek in September 2013, second, from a solo performance by one oral poet at an official state ceremony held in Bishkek in early March 2014, and third, from another oral poetry competition that took place in Issyk-Kul in August 2014. The themes of these performances were 'national language day', 'national flag day' and 'Manas', respectively. Collectively, the oral poets in these performances talk about the nation, particularly about its past and its future. There is also a striking resemblance between the talk in these stage performances and the broader conversations among the public with regard to Kyrgyz nationhood. In my discussion of these performances below, I will suggest that these oral poetry performances have contributed to the rise of a sort of 'wooden language' of nationalism among the Kyrgyz in the era of independence.<sup>210</sup> The performances of oral poets in the independence era similarly consolidate a predictable, 'citational language' that is replicated in broader public conversations on the language of nationalism that highlight the nation's glorious past and the future Kyrgyz nation becoming a moral community, with between the two the frustration of national sentiments in the present.<sup>211</sup>

## Language and National Ideology

In 1926, during the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Arabic script was banned. The Latin alphabet, its replacement, was used until 1938, when writing was finally switched over to the Cyrillic alphabet, which is still used in Kyrgyzstan today (cf. Bellér-Hann 1991).<sup>212</sup> Presently, however, the Kyrgyz are proud of their having preserved their *madaniyat* through their vast oral traditions until the rates of literacy soared, rising from less than 5% in the pre-revolutionary period to over 90% in the late Soviet era. With the revival of the glorious 'deep past' in the era of independence, vast oral

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<sup>210</sup> Heide talks about clichés, slogans like the phrases used with reference to the pride with which Kyrgyz language is talked about (Heide 2008: 284).

<sup>211</sup> In his discussion of the official language of the late Soviet era, Yurchak talks about a predictable and citational language with a 'wooden' sound popularly called 'oak language' (*dubovyi iazyk*), where 'all types of information, new and old, were presented as knowledge previously asserted and commonly known' (Yurchak 2006: 61). For further discussion of the 'wooden' official language of the late Soviet era, see (Zemtsov 1991; Corten 1992; Humphrey 2008).

<sup>212</sup> The Latin alphabet has already replaced Cyrillic in writing Turkmen, Uzbek and Azerbaijani, which is not the case with Kazakhs and Kyrgyz languages. See Fierman (1991, 2009a, 2009b).

traditions stand as a confirmation of the nomadic past, as well as of the power of the Kyrgyz language, 'which has worn out the centuries' (*kylymdardy kaarytkan*). However, more recently the Kyrgyz language has become a topic of heated debate among the public and on TV. Its inferior status in comparison to Russian, the country's official language and the language of interethnic communication, is considered by many Kyrgyz to be a disgrace to national identity in the era of independence. On 23 September 1989, the Kyrgyz language was made the state language of the Kyrgyz SSR. According to a law passed in May 2004, Russian was reinstated as the *official language*, while the development of the Kyrgyz language, which remained the *state language*, had to be promoted. In fact, recent literature on the language politics of Central Asian and Caucasian states demonstrates that the status of titular languages has risen and their domains have broadened in the post-Soviet era (Fierman 1991, 2009a, b; Adams and Rustemova 2009).

A comparison of the language politics of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan suggests that, while in the latter the titular language enjoys a status superior to Russian, in the case of Kazakhstan both the constitution and the language laws 'give Russian a role that towers over other minority tongues' (Fierman 2009b: 92). A comparison of language use in holiday spectacles in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan suggests that, while the narration, dialogue and lyrics of the spectacles are bilingual in the former, in Uzbekistan they are almost always in Uzbek (Adams and Rustemova 2009: 1259). However, in comparison to the Kazakh language, which is closest to Kyrgyz in terms of both their respective political histories and the high status the Russian language enjoys in both countries, the Kyrgyz state lacks proper policies for the Kyrgyz language. In Kyrgyzstan, a good command of Russian is not only linked to better prospects of employment, and it indicates to some extent a person's social and economic background. The situation is rapidly changing in Kazakhstan, where the state has introduced a national testing centre under the Ministry of Education to assess the Kazakh language skills of civil servants, among others, through the so-called 'Kaztest': 'The State language is officially supported by the State and provides implementation of the principles of the language policy in Kazakhstan ... it is [Kaztest] ... one of the significant State measures taken to achieve the objectives of compulsory knowledge of the State language for the citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan' (Abdiyev and Abdykhalikov 2013).

In all my conversations with poets, audience members and the wider public, an existential connection between language and nation was articulated in the fashion of Soviet ethnographers, which could readily be put

down to Soviet-era nation-making.<sup>213</sup> For many Kyrgyz, who may prefer to speak Russian in their everyday lives, the Kyrgyz nation could be on the brink of extinction due to their ignorance of their own language. This was the topic of the oral poetry competition that was organized as part of the day of national language ceremonies in September 2013.

### ***‘Mamlekettik Til Künü’ Aitysh***

The 24th anniversary of the adoption of the Kyrgyz language as the state language was celebrated in a variety of ceremonies, one of which was an oral poetry competition dedicated to the Festival of State Language (*mamlekettik til mairamy*) in Bishkek on 23 September 2013. While 29 oral poets attended the selections on the first day of the competitions, which took place in the concert hall of the national state channel KTRK, ten of them, aged between 19 and 60, received pass scores allowing them to compete in the second day of competitions held at the Philharmonics. The performances were scored by a seven-member jury. As usual, the concert hall was packed with young and old alike. This poetry competition was one of the first of its kind to be sponsored directly from the presidential budget. Moreover, the organizing committee of the poetry competition was the National Committee of State Language, which came under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Egemberdi Ermatov, the head of the Committee, made a speech before the ceremony was declared open by the singing of the Kyrgyz national anthem:

For the first time, a poetry competition dedicated to the Festival of the State Language is taking place. Special attention has been paid to the competition of the poets in accordance with the efforts to promote Kyrgyz language. When I brought this issue to the attention of the President, without a second thought he allocated from the Presidential budget 500,000 soms to support the oral poets. We all know the highest gift of the language, this is improvised poetry (*tökmölük*), this has pierced our blood, our hearts ... supporting all these ten poets today, we should respect their talents, praising the art of improvisation that it will never die out, and that the Kyrgyz language will never disappear from the face of the earth.

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<sup>213</sup> ‘As early as 1913, Stalin wrote his work “Marxism and the Question of Nationalities”, defining a nation as “a historically developed and stable community of people that has emerged on the basis of the commonality of their language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up as manifest in the community of culture ... Absence of at least one of these traits is enough for a nation not to be a nation”’ Stalin, 1951-52: 296–297, cited in (Tishkov 1997: 29). Also, ‘The Leninist–Stalinist concept of the nation, which had fundamentally shaped the context of language planning in the USSR, continued as a major, though not explicit element in the post-Soviet states’ (Fierman 2009b: 76).

The fragility of the nation's language implied in these words was also the leitmotif of the poets' performances that night. The Kyrgyz language was promulgated as an essential symbol of the nation, and a similar reference to the glorious past and bright future of the nation could be observed in the language of the poets, who, however, had bitter things to say about the present-day situation.

One of the metaphors the poets used compared the Kyrgyz language with 'a fruit tree', an image in which the poets and epic tellers of the olden times perch on its fruit like birds and sing the proud body of oral traditions, thus keeping the Kyrgyz language alive: 'This was how the Manas epic was created', remarked one young poet. However, today, although the fruit tree was still standing, the birds had flown to other trees: 'Have they flown to the Russian side? I rack my brains', the young poet added. It was concluded that, although the tree was still standing, its roots had become weaker because a nearby river had begun to dry up: 'The Russians channelled the river's water somewhere else', the poet continued, which was why they heard Russian everywhere: even mothers rocked their babies to sleep with Russian lullabies, singing '*baiu, baiu*'. If babies are raised in this way, how would they know their seven fathers by heart, let alone the Manas epic? How could they speak the language of their ancestors? Indeed, genealogical knowledge, especially the practice of listing one's ancestors seven generations back, is still widespread, being taught to children when they are as young as five years old.

A reference to the hero Manas and his times was also made in the poets' performances as an era when the Kyrgyz language was feared by the Chinese:

When the hero Manas was alive,  
Then, it scared away the Chinese,  
My language, having lived for centuries,  
Is humiliated now by Kirgiz.

(p. 246)

The audience began to applaud the young poet when he made a comparison between the deeds of the ancient hero and the ignorance of the youth today.<sup>214</sup> While the Kyrgyz language was likened to a weapon in the hands

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<sup>214</sup> The attribute *mankurt* is also frequently used to refer to the Kyrgyz ignorant of their national values. A similar theme is also explored among the Kazakhs by Dubuisson, especially with reference to the internationalist elite accused of lacking of national values (2009: 24, 109). The word *mankurt* was popularized by the famous Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov in his novel titled *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, where he refers to a man who was enslaved and tortured so that he lost his memory completely and eventually killed his mother, who was trying to rescue him from captivity.

of the ancestors against the enemies, having survived for centuries, it now is degraded by the young, who, despite their fluency in Russian and enthusiasm to learn another foreign language, cannot speak Kyrgyz properly (see also Heide 2008: 284-287). That is why the poet speaks of such young people as 'Kirgiz', not 'Kyrgyz', in a word game, to contrast those who are Russified and ignorant of their national identity with patriots who are 'authentic' Kyrgyz (Dubuisson 2009; Isci 2010). 'Kirgiz' is the Russian spelling and pronunciation of 'Kyrgyz', as well as being a rather derogatory form of address to denigrate Russified, unpatriotic segments of the population who do not speak their 'mother tongue' and are ignorant of basic Kyrgyz customs and traditions. Spelling out a long list of advice to the audience, another young poet made a similar reference to the 'Kirgiz':

Born a Kyrgyz,  
O, my people,  
May we not die as Kirgiz. (p. 246)

Another young poet referred to the degeneration of the young, saying that he had become unsettled, since:

I have no right to silence,  
I am tormented inside, since,  
There are some bird-brained,  
Their birth name is Alymbek,  
When at the 6th grade,  
His name turns into Andrey.  
While his birth name is Jekshen  
When he reaches the 7th grade,  
His name turns into Jackson. (p. 246)

These lines were treated somewhat playfully by the members of the audience, but it was only through such humour that some poets could communicate their resentment at those Kyrgyz who are strangers to their own customs and traditions at a time when the latter have become vital symbols of Kyrgyz national identity.

Singing using kin terms was another strategic method the poets employed in their performances. Just as 'ignorance of fatherland' could be equated with 'the slaying of one's own father', one poet remarked that, 'leaving the path of one's mother tongue' was no different from 'slaying one's own mother'. As he was referring to the Soviet era, the same poet mentioned some of the Kyrgyz intellectuals, poets and writers of that period

whom he gratefully thanked for preserving the ‘mother tongue’, while, in a rather confusing manner, adding that the Kyrgyz language was ‘like an orphan after seventy years of Soviet rule’. While pointing to the importance of the Kyrgyz language for the well-being of the nation in independent Kyrgyzstan, he uttered the following lines:

If the nation’s joy wanes,  
Our children, we shall see,  
Will suffer afterwards.  
Although he died, you see,  
Alive are the words of Chyngyz.  
Preserve your language,  
O people, unless you do so,  
That is the death of Kyrgyz.

(p. 247)

It is not surprising to see Kyrgyz oral poets, both young and old, depicting an existential link between the language and the nation. However, a pause in the level of the state sponsorship of nationalities in the independence era allowed the poets to repeatedly question the symbols of national identity and the attention paid to them by the public and the state and to vent frustrated nationalist sentiments. One young poet drew attention to a contrast between the growth of the market economy and the lack of any progress with regard to the promotion of the Kyrgyz language by pointing to the countless numbers of a supermarket chain called *Narodniy* (a Russian word meaning ‘national’ and/ or ‘people’s’) juxtaposed to a bookstore called *Nuska*, the only one of its kind selling books in the Kyrgyz language on that language, its literature, history and national culture:

Is it called ‘*Narodniy*’?  
Thousands of stores selling alcohol.  
With more ‘*haram*’ than ‘*halal*’,  
Thousands of stores selling food.  
Yet, there is only one store  
Selling books, poetry, epics.

...

Kyrgyz have only one bookstore,  
Preserving their blessed words.  
How can I be proud, with what  
Of the Kyrgyz language today?

(p. 247)

In the context of post-Soviet competition in nation-building, the poets often drew comparisons with the former Central Asian Soviet republics with regard to the politics of language in those countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As one poet asked, while both these countries treasure their languages, 'How come we do not do the same?'

We shall always love and  
Treasure the Kyrgyz language.  
You know the Kazakhs, how  
They adore their language.  
You know the Uzbeks, how  
They hold theirs dear.  
If we follow such a path,  
Only then ancestors shall forgive,  
Then, we become a great nation.

(p. 247)

His opponent agreed and added, 'Nations with a language are like bottomless pits; nations without are clouds carried along by winds' (*Tili bar elder teren kazgan kuduktai, tili jok elder jel aidagan buluttai*).

Bolot Nazarov, then a nineteen-year-old oral poet, received the grand prize following a four-hour oral poetry competition dedicated to the Day of the National Language. This was a strategy designed to celebrate Language Day through an oral poetry competition where the audience in the concert hall and those sitting in front of their TV sets could cherish the eloquent and oratorical use of the Kyrgyz language by the oral poets. However, while the poetry performances turned the evening into a language festival, the *talk* about the state of the language at the present day was more didactic and cautionary than celebratory of the achievements regarding the promotion of the Kyrgyz language since independence.

Moreover, it is necessary to point out the distinctiveness of Kyrgyzstan's political history since independence, given that political criticisms of this sort would be impossible to make in the other Central Asian republics, especially as part of a popular cultural tradition like oral poetry performances, which were sponsored exclusively from the presidential budget. While oral poets consider it their duty to draw the public's attention to problems of national identity, this is also very much what both the audience and the wider public expect from supporters of this eminent cultural tradition.



### At ‘Ala-Too Square’

#### *From Lenin the Mentor to Manas the Magnanimous: The Changing Face of Independence*



Plate 17. The Eid prayer in the shadow of Lenin. The statue relegated to the old square, its original place, behind the State History Museum, Bishkek.

In the Soviet era, Frunze, today's Bishkek, had been the showcase of socialist modernization both for the Kyrgyz from the region and for international visitors to the country, with its newly built roads, infrastructure, central-heating systems and multi-storey apartment blocks. The Red Square in front of the first government house of the Kyrgyz Autonomous SSR<sup>215</sup> was renamed Lenin Square in 1948 with the installation of Lenin's statue at its centre. In 1984 Lenin Square was expanded into a major square surrounded by a huge socialist architectural complex comprising the new government house (today's 'Ak Üy'), the State History Museum<sup>216</sup>, the House of Friendship of Nations and the Agricultural Industry building, with its roof resembling the roof of a traditional yurt. It was also in the same year,

<sup>215</sup> Built between 1932 and 1933, the building now serves as the main building of the American University of Central Asia.

<sup>216</sup> Built as the Central Museum of the Kyrgyz Autonomous SSR in December 1925 and renamed several times as the State Museum of Local History, Museum of National Culture, etc., the museum was the first scientific building of the Soviet era.

1984, that the square was renamed Ala-Too square<sup>217</sup>, a gigantic statue of Lenin also being erected at its centre.

The dawning of independence in 1991 did not have any ramifications for the central location of the statue of Lenin, sometimes resulting in a rather peculiar demonstration of the various ideological entanglements of the post-Soviet era. Until 2003, the prayers on the *Ait of Kurman* (*Eid al-Adha*, Festival of Sacrifice) and *Orozo* (*Eid al-Fitr*, Festival of Fasting) would take place in Ala-Too Square under the shadow of a Kyrgyz flag flying from the tall flagpole alongside the high-rising statue of Lenin.<sup>218</sup> The range of symbolisms permeating the central square was reduced when, on 16 August 2003, the statue of Lenin was removed from its central location in front of the State History Museum, replaced with a Statue of Liberty and moved behind the history museum (its original location in the old square) with a state ceremony on 8 November 2003. Highly suggestive of its American archetype, the Kyrgyz Statue of Liberty featured a Kyrgyz woman with wings holding in her arms a *tündük* (a small, round, wooden frame placed on top of a yurt as a hatch for sunlight and an outlet for smoke from the fire inside the yurt).<sup>219</sup> While at this time it was ideologically more appropriate, it was not considered to be in conformity with the social historical realities and established gender roles among the highly patriarchal Kyrgyz society (Werner 2009).

The new statue featuring a woman holding the *tündük* in her hands became a topic of heated discussion among the public, since it suggested that there was no Kyrgyz man left to uphold the *tündük*, and accordingly, none to defend the Kyrgyz homeland. After a long history of various symbolic inscriptions, the central Ala-Too Square was turned into a national space that was decisively Kyrgyz: on the 20th anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's independence, on 31st August 2011, the statue of liberty was finally replaced with a statue of the epic hero Manas, inscribed on its pedestal, 'Manas the Magnanimous' (*Aiköl Manas*).

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<sup>217</sup> From *ala* (patchy) and *too* (mountain), the word's literal meaning being the patchy snow on mountaintops. Geographically, Ala-Too is the name of the mountain range that cuts across Kyrgyzstan in an east-west direction as part of the Tien-Shan mountain range. As a metaphor, Ala-Too is used synonymously with 'homeland' in the Kyrgyz language.

<sup>218</sup> In recent years, the crowd in Ala-Too Square has overflowed to the back of the History Museum, and the prayers still take place in the shadow of the statue of Lenin. The situation is no different in the southern city of Osh.

<sup>219</sup> In traditional Kyrgyz yurts, the roof felt leaves an opening for the *tündük*, which is covered with a heavy piece of felt fabric in the evenings to keep the rain, birds and other small animals from entering the yurt; the younger women or the bride in the family remove it in the morning.

### *National Flag Day and Aaly's performance*

A portable raised platform was erected in front of the Manas statue, just to the right of a forty-metre tall flagpole, for the celebration ceremony of National Flag Day on 3rd March 2014. The flag of Kyrgyzstan, called *bairak*, *tuu* or *jelek* in the Kyrgyz language, has a red field with a yellow sun at its centre radiating forty rays, representing the forty ancient tribes from which today's Kyrgyz people are said to have descended. Moreover, the globe of the sun is stylized in the form of a *tündük*. While traditionally this was used to symbolize house and family (just as numerous rafters support the *tündük* as the roof ring, connecting it to the wooden frames which serve as the walls of the yurt; in Kyrgyz cosmology, it serves as a relevant metaphor), in the era of independence *tündük* signifies 'homeland'. The incarnation of the *tündük* as the main figure on the Kyrgyz flag intensifies the symbolic values attached to it: the flag and the *tündük* both embody the notion of independence, two sanctified objects of national identity that must be held high both metaphorically and literally.

While National Flag Day was announced on 3rd March 1992, when the Kyrgyz flag was adopted by the Supreme Council of Kyrgyzstan, the day was not celebrated officially until 2010. Since then, an official ceremony has been held in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek attended by high-ranking political figures. Together with the wider public, students from the universities and vocational high schools are also summoned to the event, with a representative of each institution carrying long flagpoles in their hands. The ceremony starts off with a short speech by the Minister of Labour, Migration and Youth, who is in charge of the event's organization, continues with an oral poetry performance of a *tökmö akyn*, and is followed by traditional folk dances, the singing of folksongs, performances of popular singers, etc. These entertaining performances are interspersed with one or two speeches by prominent public figures and members of the political elite. As such ceremonies had only been held for a few years at the time of my fieldwork, they had not yet acquired a typical schedule; for instance, on the day I recorded the event, a Manas recitation was added to the ceremony.<sup>220</sup>

Seas of red flags were fluttering in the hands of the young Kyrgyz who surrounded Ala-Too Square on three sides. When Aaly Tutkuchev's name was announced as the prominent oral poet of the nation (*elibizdin aityлуу tökmö akyny*), the crowd burst into a roar of cheering and applause. Aaly, then 29, is considered unique among the younger generation of oral poets for the intellectual depth of his poetry and his vast knowledge of

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<sup>220</sup> As already hinted at in the introduction, this was due mainly to the fact that 2014 was named 'The Year of Strengthening Statehood' by the then president, Almazbek Atambaev.

Kyrgyz history, a combination that always adds up to a vibrant performance. He belongs to the same generation as Azamat, both of whom received their training from master oral poets at the training seminars in the oral poetry school. His fame spread among the Kyrgyz as early as 2003, when he made his first public appearance at an oral poetry competition that was aired on national TV. He is acclaimed as a celebrity of traditional national culture following a duel he had with a Kazakh poet, Rinat, in 2011 when Aaly was invited to Astana for an *aitysh* dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence. While that duel remains the most antagonistic poetry duel between a Kyrgyz and a Kazakh oral poet in the long history of poetry duels between these two neighbouring peoples, upon his return to Kyrgyzstan Aaly was acknowledged as the most powerful oral poet of the Kyrgyz for his historically informed, poetically elegant, patriotic responses to the Kazakh poet's own performance, which was full of scorn for the Kyrgyz, past and present. A reference to this historic duel in Astana was one of the first reactions of many Kyrgyz when I stated that my research interest was in the role of oral poets in contemporary Kyrgyz society. My conversations on Aaly's performances during my fieldwork in his native Aral village in Talas did not differ at all from what I was told about him on my trips to other provinces of the country: he was always described as 'The patriot poet holding high Kyrgyz's flag/ *tündük*' (*Kyrgyzdyn tuusun/ tündügün biyik karmagan akyn*).

Thus, in the last couple of years his performances had become part of the official ceremonies of National Flag Day, and at around noon that day he took the stage again with a performance which lasted nine minutes, exceeding the initially planned time slot by four minutes. Aaly was fully aware of the fact that his performance was being broadcast on national TV and that his poetry would be heard by the broader public; however, his immediate audience in Ala-Too Square consisted mainly of young Kyrgyz. After the first two lines, he worked a Russian phrase into his greetings, upon which he remarked jokingly that the audience had clapped more enthusiastically after he had done so. He deliberately added a foreign-language phrase as a clever manoeuvre as he began to address Kyrgyz national sentiments, implicitly advising young people to speak their mother tongue.

After his opening lines, Aaly sang about the destitute of the ancient Kyrgyz who lived under the rule of other regional khanates until prominent historical figures such as Barsbek Kagan<sup>221</sup> and Manas appeared, who 'held

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<sup>221</sup> The earliest information on Barsbek is found on Orkhon inscriptions. Living in the 8th century AD., Barsbek ruled the Kyrgyz as a member of the confederations of the Turkic tribes and of the 2nd Turkic state, known as Göktürks. Seeking an alliance with the Chinese and

high the flag, tying their hearts to the tip of a spear'<sup>222</sup> and fighting for Kyrgyz unity and independence. If at present day the Kyrgyz people were independent and both the old and young in the audience could gather together under the 'red flag waving in the sky', he said that this was due to the courage and bravery of these forefathers. After this historical reference, he stopped to praise the flags being waved by the young people in the square, as well as another national symbol, the white felt hat or *ak-kalpak*<sup>223</sup>, later playfully addressing the policemen present that they would look much more attractive if they put on a *kalpak* rather than their official top hats, a gibe which drew loud cheers and applause from the audience and smiles from the policemen. He spoke of *ak-kalpak* as the most ancient heritage of the Kyrgyz, 'reaching the day of independence', 'preventing the enemy from waging war', 'cutting off many heads' and being 'hard-wearing over the centuries'. After imploring loyalty to this nomadic heritage, Aaly warned the young people present that if they ignored the 'symbol of the Kyrgyz', it would be a 'weakness that would delight the foreigners'. However, he said he was hopeful for the future of the Kyrgyz and added, 'Into despair no one should sink, as the whole nation is convalescing' (*eldin baary kelishte, ech kim batpasyn armanga*).

From this point forward, Aaly mixed his advice to the young with fleeting and at times implicit references to the present day before he moved to the final section of his performance, where he sang his blessings to the nation. His first advice was that young Kyrgyz should be 'Brave, observing the customs and traditions, with their *kalpak* on their heads', (*Kalpagy bar bashynda, kaadaluu, salttuu, er kishi*). The words *kaada* and *salt* are usually used together, and interchangeably, in Kyrgyz, literally meaning 'traditions and longstanding practices'. By suggesting that a young Kyrgyz man with a white *kalpak* on his head resembled the snow-capped Ala-Too Mountains, Aaly added yet another reference to a national symbol of the independent Kyrgyz. His second advice to the young was to 'walk on the right path', as 'you are the owners of the future of our nation'. Following these implicit criticisms of young people's ignorance of Kyrgyz traditions and their venerable intangible cultural heritage, Aaly mentioned a despoiled 'khan

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other nonconformist Turkic tribes, he rebelled in order to establish an independent Kyrgyz khanate, but he was killed and his rebellion was put down by the Göktürks (Useev 2011; Hudyakov 2013; Kojobekov 2013).

<sup>222</sup> This is a reference to the death of the hero Manas. According to some variants of the Manas epic, Manas was killed with a spear while he was praying *namaz*.

<sup>223</sup> 5th March is *Ak-kalpak* day in Kyrgyzstan, two days after the flag day. Nearly all the audience came to the square wearing felt hats, which Aaly commented on as the 'sign of nomadism' and a smart invention of the forefathers, as it would protect the brains of today's youth from deteriorating.

figure', a reference to the first and second presidents of the country, whose terms in office were a stark contrast to those of Barsbek and Manas. He condemned the khans of the independence era for stealing the nation's gold, though on the other hand young Kyrgyz were bringing golden medals back, a reference to the recent Olympic games in Beijing. As he started offering a blessing to his country, he expressed the hope that the country should be famous not for 'its chaos, but its songs/ poetry' (*jyry menen taanylbai, yry menen taanylsyn*), not for its 'wars, but its voice/ vote' (*sogushu menen taanylbai, dobushu menen taanylsyn*). This couplet sounded more like criticism of Kyrgyz political history since independence than a plea for the future. The word *jyr* means 'chaos', 'disorder', while *sogush* means war and conflict. In fact, the two words referred to the two infamous revolutions and the looting and criminal activities that followed them, as well as the ethnic clashes with the Uzbeks in the south of the country in 1990 and 2010. As his lines became more prayer-like, Aaly said, 'May other nations look up to the red flag', and 'May the Kyrgyz nation be proud of the red flag', both lines pointing to the *status quo*, where nothing similar was happening.

Aaly made his point about the revolutions clearer when he added that among the Kyrgyz 'May there be no revolutions, may we live together in peace' (*ölködö bolboi ynkylap, jashasyn ölkö tynchyrak*). His pleas continued as follows: 'May the red flag fly high for centuries', 'May the young of the future achieve many good deeds', 'May the nations of the world look up to *ak-kalpak* Kyrgyz' and 'May your future happiness be as tall as Ala-Too'. As he concluded his performance, he added the following lines:

So, let the poetry end here,  
May your blessings end, never,  
The Kyrgyz youth, each and every one,  
May they carry the nation's burden,  
May you hold your heads up high,  
May you live long, forever,  
May this red flag never fall.

(p. 247)

The moral authority of the past, its 'deep history' and the image of the Kyrgyz nation as a prospective moral community, depicted in Aaly's performance on National Flag Day, is significant for its implications for the present day.

As already noted, Aaly's performance lasted four minutes longer than was initially planned. As soon as the Master of Ceremonies took a few steps towards him, he included in his improvisation two lines about her, saying,

‘As if to give me a pinch, my [elder] sister came close; a good *akyn* realizes even before he is told’. As the cheers and applause broke out, and the sea of flags waved in the hands of the young people, Aaly’s performance nurtured the nationalist sentiments of the audience watching the event live on TV, as well as those celebrating the flag day on the central Ala-Too Square, which, once again, was being blessed by the ‘voice of the ancestors’ as a truly Kyrgyz national space.

### Issyk-Kul: The Golden Cradle of *Manaschys*

A number of famous *Manaschys* were born in Issyk-Kul province. Like the so-called blessed, holy places in Aral, the village of oral poets in Talas province, Lake Issyk-Kul in Issyk-Kul province is also attributed certain spiritual powers in explaining the large number of *Manaschys* from the region (Heide 2008: 302). In recognition of the region’s epic reciters, in August 2014 a two-day oral poetry competition was held in Karakol, the administrative centre of the province. The poetry competition was devoted to a long list of anniversaries which coincided that year, as well as other important dates, and the official annotation for the poetry event ran as follows:

The nationwide *Aitysh* of oral poets, dedicated to Choyuke Ömüruulu’s 150th, Toktogul Satylganov’s 150th, Sayakbai Karalaev’s 120th, Kaba Atabekov’s 90th and Urkash Mambetaliyev’s 80th anniversaries. Similarly, to the 25th anniversary of the declaration of Kyrgyz language as the Kyrgyz state language, as well as ‘2014 as the year of strengthening Kyrgyz statehood’, entitled, Issyk-Kul: the golden cradle of the *Manaschys*.<sup>224</sup>

Collectively the performances of the oral poets touched on several major themes. First of all, they celebrated the audience as ‘the people of Issyk-Kul’, a region that has so many prominent *Manaschys*. In their praises, they often referred to the ability of the epics to have preserved the collective identity of the Kyrgyz as a nation, with phrases like ‘What made Kyrgyz a nation, and preserved as such’ (*Kyrgyzdy Kyrgyz kylyp, saktap turgan*). Next, in the performances, *Manas*, both the hero and the epic, was attributed with a mysterious agency which would safeguard Kyrgyz national identity in the era of independence (Heide 2008: 62; see also Jacquesson 2010).<sup>225</sup> It

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<sup>224</sup> It should be noted that the famous master oral poet Toktogul Satylganov is not a *Manaschy*, nor is he from this region. However, adding his name to the list of anniversaries makes the list longer and more impressive, which is especially a matter of pride for the people of the region.

<sup>225</sup> As a regional comparison, Adams and Rustemova talk about a ‘vague greatness’ of Uzbek national identity and draw attention to the Uzbek president’s attempts to claim a relationship

was collectively articulated that, as the world's longest epic, the Manas epic was a confirmation of the richness of the Kyrgyz language. Moreover, the lake itself was constantly referred to as a gracious mother, a source of inspiration for the epic tellers, being formed from the tears of Manas' wife after his death, its depth being equal to the depth of the epic, etc. One master poet suggested that all nations had their theatres and shrines, prominent people such as 'Shakespeare, Schiller and Schubert', however, 'which nation has *Manaschy*, singing night and day<sup>226</sup>, like the gushing of a spring river'.<sup>227</sup> The same poet also pointed out that comparing Sayakbai with Homer would be a denigration of the great Kyrgyz *Manaschy*.<sup>228</sup> Such praises, devoted to the people of the region, its history, the lake, the hero Manas and his epic, and other epic tellers were opening lines that typified almost every poet's performance.

Poets usually took a few minutes off from duelling with their opponents in order to direct their messages to their audiences and the wider Kyrgyz nation. In this regard, both the initial praises and the duel that took place next served to signal complete submission to the domain of tradition. Like the example in the previous chapter, the poets immerse themselves in the traditional quality of their art, only after they feel completely protected with their traditional authority and the immunity of their status do they begin to express criticisms. The poet who contrasted the famous *Manaschy* with Homer continued his performance with criticisms of the present-day situation. His criticisms targeted not only ordinary Kyrgyz, but also the Kyrgyz political elite and businessmen, especially with regard to the lack of interest in the Manas epic and its teachings, while the values of the market economy are venerated instead:

Today, though, its condition,  
So bleak, and so sad.  
Our hero we do not praise,  
Burying our head in the sand.  
Facing the *Ak-kalpak* nation,  
I do not wish to tell stories.  
Kumtor is lovely for the rulers,

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with the fourteenth-century ruler Amir Timur (Tamerlane) (Adams and Rustemova 2009: 1262, 1270-1272).

<sup>226</sup> Recitation of the famous epic tellers such as Sagymbai and Sayakbai is said to have lasted for days without a break.

<sup>227</sup> The constant comparison with 'other nations' is a Soviet legacy, which contributes to the 'frustrated nationalism' of the present. I say more about this in the conclusion to the chapter.

<sup>228</sup> Sayakbai (1894-1971) is a prominent Soviet-era Manas-epic reciter, and he is proudly referred to by the Kyrgyz as the Homer of the twentieth century.



Alas, '*Külchoro*' fell from grace!  
 Centerra is dear to the rulers,  
 '*Semetei*' far from their hearts! (p. 248)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Kumtor* is a gold mine located in the same province, while Centerra is the name of the Canadian company operating the mine. While the rulers could not share the material wealth of the province, the poet suggested that its spiritual wealth, which was invoked with reference to '*Külchoro*' (a friend of Manas in the epic) and '*Semetei*' (the son of Manas, also the title of one book of the Manas trilogy), was not acknowledged. He added that while this spiritual wealth was the hope of 'a despondent nation' (*üshkiürgeñ el*), the lakesides where the *Manaschy* Choyuke and Sayakbai used to perform were now occupied by rich foreigners and travel agencies.

Following this master poet, a younger poet launched his criticism of the present-day situation of the Kyrgyz nation, again in contrast to a vague greatness of the deep past:

O Kyrgyz, enthralling all others,  
 We can't build a factory, tanks, cars.  
 In the age of global technology,  
 We can't make iPhones, computers.  
 Even if we made a machine gun,  
 We cannot amaze the people of Asia.  
 Yes, we may be proud of our Manas,  
 Though, we can't hear it for 15 minutes.  
 Offering a robe, a horse, as in our custom,  
 We can't gratify our Manaschys.  
 Think over, the glorious Kyrgyz nation,  
 With a simple medal, we can't honour them.  
 Unless we uphold national culture,  
 We won't move slightly ahead.  
 Not honouring a handful of epic tellers,  
 We are not ashamed of beating our chests,  
 And proclaiming that we are Kyrgyz. (p. 248)

The performance above received the longest applause from the audience that evening. Indeed, the poet was speaking the truth to the people, asking them to reflect on conditions in the Kyrgyz nation at the present day. He communicated his rich description of the present through a demonstration of the shortcomings of the Kyrgyz in the era of independence. Particularly

noteworthy were his notes on 'the others' and how they perceived the Kyrgyz nation, which echoed the 'competition culture' of the Soviet era regionally, nationally and internationally. Moreover, he implicitly stated that, while all the other failures might be due to the country's poverty, it was shameful that Kyrgyz today could not stand listening to recitations of the Manas epic for more than fifteen minutes. Given all these facts, it was utterly disgraceful, he concluded, that the Kyrgyz could still brag about their national identity. The younger poets followed in the footsteps of this poet to voice their own disapproval of the practices of their fellow Kyrgyz. 'They speak Russian and other foreign languages, to be classy', one of them remarked; 'I feel like I am in London when I arrive in the capital', he continued.

One poet suggested that, as the offspring of Manas, the Kyrgyz people should take his life as an exemplar for the success of the nation and pay attention to the wisdom of the epic, thus keeping the nation on the right path. *Manaschys* received their vocation for telling epics from the Creator<sup>229</sup>, which is how this 'beautiful heritage' remained in their memory, and that is how it should be received, warmly, by the audience. Thus, the ancestors have handed over the epic to the later generations:

The longest epic in the world,  
 Compare its quality.  
 Centuries passed by,  
 It describes in its entirety.  
 In the absence of internet and cell phones,  
 Manaschys and oral poets  
 Were the nation's joy and treasure.  
 The art of Manaschys remained [so that]  
 Our children learn it by heart,  
 To Unesco, we have it inscribed. (p. 248)

While some of the performances above come across as confessions, their implications for the tradition of oral poetry in the post-Soviet era deserve further consideration. While these younger generations of poets warned about the 'perils of postsocialism', they did not necessarily point to the 'leaders', 'rulers', or the broader category of local and national

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<sup>229</sup> The phenomenon of 'the vocation dream' proclaimed by reciters of the Manas epic has been extensively discussed by Heide in her work on the Kyrgyz epic (Heide 2008: 111-123). Although ordinary Kyrgyz attribute a similar spirituality to the oral poets by virtue of their skills in instantaneous improvisation, none of my oral poet friends stated that they had a vocational dream.

politicians, instead holding ordinary Kyrgyz accountable for the demise of Kyrgyz national identity. Like the criticisms aired at the competition dedicated to language day, it is the duty of the poets to guide the people out of this perceived impasse before the nation in this regionally sponsored competition. The status thereby attributed to the oral poets brings out the remarkable ramifications of the oral poetry institution in the independence era as a medium in which traditionally and culturally informed criticisms can be made about the 'nation' with complete immunity through ritual rudeness.

### **Conclusion: Frustrated Nationalism and the Post-Soviet Nation**

The materials used in this chapter can be analysed at two levels. First of all, it is the discursive level at which the present condition of Kyrgyz national identity is being debated among the general public, the politicians and the cultural workers. At this level, it should be noted that the debates over Kyrgyz civilization or national culture being in a coma since the dissolution of the Soviet Union suggests that the national culture was healthier at that time. It is not, however, *only* the country's serious financial circumstances or its rulers' impotence which is the direct cause of this coma-like condition of the national culture: it is also due to the wider Kyrgyz public not upholding the symbols of the nation. In addition, the implications of the debates on 'national degradation' (*uluttuk degradatsia*) among the Kyrgyz again refer to the nation-building practices of the Soviet era, while implying a lack of similarly effective practices in the era of independence. The category of the nation is no longer programmatically sponsored, as was instrumentalized in the Soviet era, which makes people feel less Kyrgyz than they formerly were. Lastly, the presidential decree quoted earlier, which candidly underlines the fragility of the state and nation in independent Kyrgyzstan, makes yet another reference to the tainted experience of the nation in the independence era, especially when it reads, 'We lost more than we gained in the first twenty years of independence'. These debates about the nation suggest that the 'nationality question' in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, while sharing similar ideological roots and political history to the situation in its neighbours, is taking a different turn.

Skilfully summarizing the regional literature on the Soviet roots of post-Soviet nationalism, Morgan Liu argues that the legacy of nationality politics under state socialism haunted the Central Asian republics: 'It made Central Asians as they see themselves today, reflected in the often strident nationalisms promulgated by the post-Soviet states, whose narratives of "proud past, great futures", which ignore Russian rule as mere interruption, in reality reiterate Soviet ideological forms and even content' (2011: 118; see also Adams 2010). Unlike the taken-for-granted views of Central Asian

nationalism as the revival of repressed national sentiments, ethnographic accounts argue for recognition of the Soviet formulation and maintenance of ethno-national sentiments, which in the post-Soviet era are being mobilized further by the nascent regional republics as alternative sources of collective identities (Adams 1999; Kandiyoti 2002; Ilkhamov 2004;). As Liu concludes, 'Simply put, Central Asians today are more Soviet in their everyday routines and categories of thought than most admit, and Soviet rule left much more than a veneer' (2011: 118). In contrast to the successful cases of post-Soviet nation-building practices in the region, the failure to promote national identity among the Kyrgyz has resulted in the frustration of national sentiments. I argue that 'frustrated nationalism', as I have documented it among the Kyrgyz, is expressed through the public disclosure of the nation's weakness and the fragility of national identity at the very moment the same people boast about the liberal climate in independent Kyrgyzstan, seeking consolation from the nation's vague claims to a glorious past and great future.

At the second level of analysis, I explore the phenomenon I call frustrated nationalism through the language of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances, especially when they refer in their poetry to the social, economic and political circumstances with which independent Kyrgyzstan has been struggling since the country's independence. On the one hand, Kyrgyz oral poets are highly esteemed as the real patriots for their preservation of the nation's unique oral traditions. On the other hand, the same poets use their status to criticize both the ordinary people and the politicians aggressively for their lack of interest in upholding Kyrgyz national culture. Indeed, no expression can better capture the sentiments of these poets than that they are 'fiercely patriotic and just as fiercely rebellious at one and the same time' (Herzfeld 1997: 55).

These performances are a distinctively 'Kyrgyz conversation' about the nation and the representation of the collective identity of its people, in which the image of the nation is presented to the broader Kyrgyz public. As the ethnographic example cited at the opening of this chapter suggests, expressing dissident opinions on national identity through cultural performances would be unthinkable in other regional republics. Nonetheless, it is the relatively liberal atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the traditional authority of Kyrgyz oral poets, that allows expressions of frustrated national sentiments to be made.



## ***Chapter 7***

### **From ‘Culture Workers’ to ‘Poets for Hire’**

When, several times on a Wednesday afternoon in November 2013, I tried to get in touch with Jenishbek to inquire about his plans for the coming weekend, I was a bit puzzled when he kept declining my calls. Soon afterwards he sent a text message inviting me to his house. Thinking it might be urgent, I drove to his house some ten kilometres from the centre of Bishkek. As I entered his courtyard through its giant iron gates, I noticed him waiting outside his house, and he waved with one hand, welcoming me in. This was strange, since we would normally exchange some words of greeting the moment I stepped into his courtyard, which was approximately thirty metres from his house. It was not too long before I realized that he had lost his voice completely. Regardless of how hard he tried, it was not possible for me to understand clearly what he was saying. His voice was hoarse with a sore throat, and he could barely speak intelligibly, so we communicated that afternoon mostly through body language, casual nods and shakes of the head, and by scribbling keywords on a piece of paper that I finally produced out of my bag. When I asked how many bookings (*zakaz*) he had received for the weekend, he held up four fingers on his right hand; three on Friday and one on Saturday. Throwing his hands up into the air and pointing to his mouth, he was trying to say that he was unlikely to be able to perform that weekend. I remembered what he had told me a week earlier about the approaching tuition fee payments for his child, who was attending a private high school. Indeed, as the ‘*toi* season’ was coming to an end with winter fast approaching, Jenishbek, like all the other oral poets I knew, was clutching at straws to get more invitations to perform at life-cycle rituals. As he was showing me what medication he was taking to get his voice back, doctor’s prescriptions as well as herbal remedies, his phone rang, which he passed to me to answer the call and carry on the conversation. It was yet another ‘client’ who explained that she had received Jenishbek’s number from a friend of hers at whose wedding Jenishbek had performed some months previously, and she was asking if he could come and perform at her

father's eightieth birthday party, which would take place in a luxurious *toikana* the following week. Jenishbek nodded happily, wrote a quick note for me saying that he would send her a message after the call and that they could arrange the details the following week. He held up two fingers, implying that, together with this booking, he had already agreed two performances scheduled for the upcoming week, and although he could not attend any of the four bookings that weekend due to his losing his voice, he was glad to see that at least the bookings were piling up for the coming weeks. I spent almost two more hours at his house, and as we were sipping our tea, I made calls to the four hosts who had invited him for that weekend and asked whether they would accept either of Jenishbek's best two apprentices in his place. While two of the hosts agreed, the other two said they would look for a quick replacement themselves instead. It was important for a poet that the bookings would not be cancelled because he did not want to lose his business to a rival master oral poet.

The dramatic fall of the Soviet Union meant the dawn of a process of the 'cruel "unmaking" of an accustomed way of life', 'the termination of practical ways of life',<sup>230</sup> for broad sectors of the populations of the former Soviet countries, and the lives of the oral poets were no exception. As the budgets of the State Philharmonics, theatres and radio stations where most oral poets were employed in the 1980s plummeted, salaries could no longer be paid to them or other cultural workers. Many poets resigned from their posts at the state institutions, only to find themselves looking for ways to feed their families. The institution of oral poetry, systematized under the State Philharmonics since the early 1930s, broke down, and the oral poets, the prestigious cultural workers of the Soviet era, were abandoned to their fates, just like everyone else in the country. In the first decade of independence, both the master oral poets of today, who were teenagers in the 1990s, and the last generation of Soviet-era poets found themselves in dire financial situations, and searching for new jobs became a daily routine.

For the oral poets, the ambiguity of 'what to sing about' was equally pressing. This ambiguity was explicit in my conversations with the wife of a famous Soviet-era poet, the late Ashyraaly Aitaliyev. As she talked about her husband's professional life as a cultural worker, she emphasized the party's pressure 'not to abandon the theme' during the performances they had staged across the country. She remarked, 'They were not allowed to sing freely'. Indeed, I had heard numerous accounts of resentments like hers referring to the party's censorship of the poetry performances. However, to me such

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<sup>230</sup> Humphrey (2002) and Hann (2011) both describe the end of the Soviet era as a rupturing experience for those used to living under state socialism. See also Steinberg and Wanner (2008) for similar arguments about the end of Soviet rule.

statements sounded more like a nationalist excuse for the 'socialist poets', who were acknowledged as tradition-bearers and preservers of the national heritage in the independence era, than like a faithful account of 'actually existing socialism'.<sup>231</sup> As she continued her account of her husband's professional life, she began to contradict herself, saying that he was always grateful to the state since he was provided with the ideal conditions to improve himself as a songwriter and composer, as many of his lyrics were put to music later on, increasing his popularity. As we were conversing about the early 1990s, she put her description of the chaotic climate for the poets into words quite skilfully, describing more broadly the tradition's fate in the Soviet era. She said, 'Poets used to sing for the state for all their lives; they did not know what to sing about in the early messy years of democracy'. On this same theme, the Kyrgyz folklorist Sulaiman Kaiypov comments as follows:

It is important to realize that oral poets were not allowed to improvise anymore, at least their performances were not complete improvisations as in pre-Soviet era, and they had to perform on the topics approved by the administration of the State Philharmonics – of course that meant the party. However, these poets never had to think about the themes of their performances. For them, it was the lyrics that they had to formulate, which melodies they should play and how their poetry should rhyme; the themes and topics of the performances were chosen for them. This was not the case following the collapse of the Soviets. For the first time in the lives of these Soviet-era born oral poets, they had complete freedom to sing on any theme, and this was the core of the problem. They did not know whether they should be with the independent state or against it, if they should support privatization and democracy or fight against them. They were puzzled for a while.<sup>232</sup>

Since the late 1990s, however, oral poetry has achieved prominence with the public. This was mainly because the younger generation of oral poets revived the model of the 'cultural workers' of their Soviet era masters and became post-Soviet, 'national culture workers'. When nation-wide *aitysh*<sup>233</sup> competitions appeared as one of the most popular traditional Kyrgyz cultural

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<sup>231</sup> In fact, the pressure from the party was no longer overwhelming in the late socialist era. What is more, poets were not only singing for the state, they continued to sing for the people off the socialist stage. See Chapter 4 for a broader discussion of these 'offstage performances'.

<sup>232</sup> Interview with Sulaiman Kaiypov, 29/08/2013.

<sup>233</sup> *Aitysh* competitions rapidly expanded with the foundation of the *Aitysh Koomduk Fondu* oral poetry school in 2001; see the introduction to Chapter 5.



events, today's master oral poets were in their early twenties. Imitating their Soviet-era masters' socialist-realist performances, they soon began to improvise with reference to postsocialist-realist themes, which included widespread poverty, corruption, the shrinking of state provisions, a newly introduced tax system, etc. In their performances, they elaborated on the category of the 'Kyrgyz nation' as an emerging moral community and its fate in the aftermath of independence and referred to their audience as 'my Kyrgyz people' (*Kyrgyz elim*). The skilful performances of these relatively young poets have consolidated their status as the bearers of tradition, singing extensively about the 'glorious' history, customs and traditional values of the Kyrgyz, as well as the genealogy of the nation. These oral poetry competitions have served as occasions on which Kyrgyz national culture apparently thrived. Moreover, through *aitysh* competitions, young oral poets displayed their skills in improvisation, *komuz*-playing, and repartee, while at the same time proving their knowledge of Kyrgyz history and customs. With their *aitysh* performances, which are national in both form and content, the oral poets now represented the 'authentic' Kyrgyz.

The popularization of oral poetry coincided with the relative economic prosperity of the early 2000s, since when solo oral poetry performances have become a significant ritual component of conspicuous consumption surrounding the *toi* celebrations.<sup>234</sup> As mentioned in Chapters 5 and 6, *aitysh* events are prized competitions, and those oral poets who earn the highest scores receive cash prizes up to \$4,000, or they may be presented with lavish gifts such as cars. However, although such competitions are quite frequent<sup>235</sup>, they are not stable sources of income for the poets. With approximately sixty poets regularly attending these competitions, only the first eight to ten are presented with prizes, and they are not always the same poets. Thus, while nation-wide competitions do allow poets to advertise their skills to a broader audience through extensive media coverage, it is the life-cycle ceremonies that have become the main source of income for the majority of them since the early 2000s.

This chapter introduces the lives of Kyrgyz oral poets beyond the stage to explore the impact of 'the market' on the oral poetry tradition. The broader aim of the chapter is to document the conflation of 'heritage' and

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<sup>234</sup> As among other Central Asian peoples, the category of *toi* is rather broad among the Kyrgyz, denoting any kind of celebratory event, such as *ordo toi*, a party held when one purchases a house, or *tüshö kesüü toi*, a party held when a baby is one year old and about to begin walking.

<sup>235</sup> During my fieldwork, around fifteen nation-wide *aitysh* competitions took place in Kyrgyzstan, while some Kyrgyz oral poets were invited to compete in international *aitysh* competitions held in Kazakhstan.

'the market' through poetry performances as ritual components of the conspicuous consumption of the *toi* industry in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. What is the role of oral poetry performances in the ritual economy of the Kyrgyz? Why are oral poets invited to life-cycle rituals, and what are the motivations behind the choice of a particular poet? What roles do regional loyalties, kinship networks, political standing and religious leanings play in the poets' popularity with the broader public? How do the poets promote themselves and the cultural heritage that their performances stand for? What are their aspirations, fears and anxieties, and how do these inform their art? While answering these questions, I will point to the ways in which oral poetry performances act as strong cultural mechanisms in adapting themselves to the new circumstances resulting from the influence of the market economy following the collapse of state socialism.

Following a brief account of the financial transactions involved in life-cycle rituals, especially with regard to the remuneration paid to the oral poets and their financial circumstances in general, I will continue with the life story of the oral poet I know best, Jenishbek. The following thick description of the everyday life of a master poet in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan will conclude the historical ethnography of oral poetry performances, my account of which started with the biography of a pre-revolutionary master oral poet, Toktogul Satylganov. Jenishbek's life provides a lens through which I attempt to document the resilience and transformation of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances, which have been an intimate and integrative element of Kyrgyz social life over the last century. I will suggest that, since the country gained its independence, these performances have displayed strong similarities to both Soviet-era and pre-Soviet practices, albeit in different ways.

I will argue that the form of *aitysh* competitions and the role the oral poets have assumed in contemporary Kyrgyzstan strongly resemble their respective roles in the Soviet era. As socialist cultural workers, the oral poets' job was to enlighten the masses. Their performances therefore belonged to the educational and enlightenment institutions, as they encouraged the masses to work hard for the ideals of socialism and to denounce the feudal past, as well as all the backward practices associated with it. Today, oral poets appear as post-Soviet, national culture workers, who, through the didactic tone of their performances, caution the nation against corruption, laziness and ignorance of Kyrgyz customs, history and language, while promoting Kyrgyz national identity. They position themselves between the people and the politicians, re-enacting their traditional authority in their criticism of socio-economic and political failures in the era of independence. While they also denounce regional and

tribal identities, they promote ethnic solidarity and interethnic peace. As such, similar to their Soviet era predecessors, oral poets today assume the role of an educator and a mentor for the broader public. Their performances inspire cohesion and trust, fostering a sense of moral community.

With regard to the similarities between today's oral poetry performances and those of the pre-Soviet era, it should be noted that solo performances and poetry competitions used to be central aspects of pre-revolutionary feasts and festivals where the regional elites would have their poets sing for the event or compete with poets from other regions. As I will show in the next section, it is precisely such claims of cultural continuity with pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz social life that the hosts of contemporary events expressed when I inquired why they were inviting oral poets to their ceremonies. Thus, Kyrgyz oral poetry performances provide a lens through which we can locate the continuities that have accompanied social change across a century of social, political and economic transformation.

### **Oral Poets and the Political Economy of Post-Soviet Celebrations**

Invariably, Kyrgyz *tois* include large-scale feasting and tend to take place more frequently between the months of June and November, which is not only a period when fruit and vegetables are relatively cheap, but also when rural Kyrgyz save their earnings from the sale of their harvests and livestock farming.<sup>236</sup> The fact that rural Kyrgyz have ready cash in this season is significant, not only for individual or family expenses, but also because it is a cognate factor in the social organization of a given community. Unless singlehandedly sponsored by a wealthy businessman or member of the political elite, it is the locals who raise the money for regional festivals from every household. The organization of this local fund-raising activity, called *marafon*, is not limited to the purpose of holding a regional festival. *Marafons* have become increasingly popular in the post-Soviet era as an alternative source of funding where state provisions usually fail: they are used to repair or improve the conditions of public institutions such as schools, hospitals, museums, etc.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> It is not altogether impossible to hold a wedding celebration in winter, in which cases the guests usually suspect that the bride is already pregnant.

<sup>237</sup> *Marafon* is a 'Popular means of fund-raising in [the] post-Soviet era. An organization or institution with a budget shortage holds a fund-raising marathon and invites people to donate money for some jubilee or other memorial date' (Shamatov 2004: 279).



Plate 18. Slaughtering a horse to be consumed at the festival marking the reunion of alumna of the village school. The money collected through the *marafon* was used to repair the gate of the local school. Aral village, Talas, May 2014.

Although there were similar practices among the pre-revolutionary Kyrgyz, the *marafon* may have developed out of Soviet-era practices when each collective or state farm would collectively purchase farm equipment or oversee the maintenance of a public institution. While the Soviet state thereby transferred its provisional role to local communities, which also led to the holding of competitions in a socialist spirit, similar pre-revolutionary practices were condemned by the Soviet authorities on the grounds that they perpetuated the exploitative relationship between local populations and the notables.<sup>238</sup> On the other hand, a similar undercurrent cannot be claimed about the excessive ritual economy of life-cycle rituals in the independence era, which poses a severe contrast to Soviet-era practices, at least for

<sup>238</sup> Monies collected through the *marafon* are called *chygym*, or 'social expenses'. See Loring (2008: 241-243) and Igmen (2012: 19) for the cultural history of *chygym* among the Kyrgyz, and the Soviet discourse against it as a 'crime of custom' and an exploitative instrument in the hands of tribal elites. Similar phenomena exist in rural Turkey: for a study of *imece* and *emanet*, see Geray (1965); for the concept of a 'village chest', see Stirling (1965: 31-33); for a discussion of the ritual economy and 'ceremonial fund' among rural Kyrgyz, see Light (2015); for a broader discussion of the topic, see Wolf (1966).

ordinary Kyrgyz. In fact, despite party interventions throughout the Soviet era, the regional notables kept up their celebrations relatively unrestrained. As I showed in Chapter 3, oral poets were also instrumental in warning rural Kyrgyz against holding lavish celebrations in their performances where they criticized the perpetuation of such pre-revolutionary practices, implying that such people might be stealing *kolkhoz* animals to be consumed at the feasts during the celebrations.<sup>239</sup>

Today, most life-cycle rituals take place in cafés in towns and cities across the country to which, on average, two to three hundred guests are invited.<sup>240</sup> The tables are lavishly decorated with appetizers, fruit and other food such as nuts, cheese and salami, and by candies together with several kinds of alcoholic drinks and fizzy beverages. The hosts are usually expected to slaughter a horse for these celebrations, or, in line with growing Islamic sentiment, a cow or several sheep might be served instead. The *tamada*, a combination of a toastmaster and a master of ceremonies, is in charge of the reception while serving at the same time as the event's chief entertainer. Possibly the *tamada* institution, originally a Georgian tradition, was introduced to the Kyrgyz through interaction with other nations in the Soviet period.<sup>241</sup> In traditional Kyrgyz culture, the nearest institution to the *tamada* is the *jarchy*, usually an oral poet who, using his eloquent language skills, sings over the course of a festival. A *jarchy* not only sang praises to the host of the event, he also entertained the guests, informing them of the details of the celebrations, the games and events that would take place over the course the festival, a tradition that is called *jarchylyk* or *jar chakyrUU*. As the traditional cultural institutions are reinterpreted in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, the institution of the *jarchylyk* has been further differentiated, *tamada* and oral poet becoming inseparable elements of both large-scale festivals and smaller life-cycle rituals. Depending on the event's budget, a singer and/ or an amateur dance group can be invited to entertain the guests, who nevertheless enjoy the event with its non-stop music and a variety of games involving the guests that the *tamada* directs. A short break occasionally interrupts the music and food when the guests take the stage to make toasts

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<sup>239</sup> The lavish official celebrations, on the other hand, received much more prominence in the Soviet era; see Lane (1984), Petrone (2000) and Rolf (2000) for more detailed discussions.

<sup>240</sup> Since both food and entertainment can be offered simultaneously, celebrations at cafes and restaurants have also caught on at the village level. Until recently, however, the organization of such *tois* was divided: while the food was served at the host's house, the entertainment would take place in the concert hall of the local house of culture. While I was doing my village ethnography in Aral, a café was being built by a villager, which soon replaced the village's house of culture as the only venue for entertainment partly because it saved the villagers from travelling to towns for their celebrations.

<sup>241</sup> See Mühlfried (2007) for a more detailed discussion of *tamada* in the Georgian context.

in groups of five to ten. The arrangement of the event, which usually lasts from the late afternoon, i.e. 5pm-6pm until midnight, does not show much variation with regard to the type of *toi*, namely celebrations of life cycle rituals, festivals organized by public and private institutions (*korparativnyi praznik/ vecherinka*). Regional festivals marking the birthdays of regional notables or the foundation year of a town, and regional celebrations of national holidays such as *Nowruz*, New Year, religious holidays, etc., which are also referred to as *tois*, may have different schedules and forms of entertainment.

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, economic calculations, transactions and exchange relations receive most prominence in the case of a wedding. In a typical wedding, the ritual expenditure mentioned above soars, not only with the addition of a dowry, but also the brideprice (*kalyn*) that is paid by the groom's family to the family of the bride. Payment of a brideprice is still practised widely among the Kyrgyz, and it figures prominently in the ritual economy, as it can be as high as 150,000 som (over \$2,500) in certain parts of the country.<sup>242</sup> An average wedding reception, coupled with other marriage-related expenditures, costs between \$15,000 and \$20,000 in Bishkek, while it would be around half that amount in the regions.<sup>243</sup>

As part of these *tois* and the ritual economy surrounding them, since early 2000s it has become a widespread practice to begin these events with an oral poetry performance, turning these ceremonies into a major source of income for oral poets. The majority of the younger generation of master oral poets, aged between 25 and 45, depend on such invitations to earn a living. The revival of this tradition is explained in several ways by local people. It has become the norm in the independence era to let the oral poets 'open the stage', or, as they say in Kyrgyz, '*sakhnany akyndar achat*':

This tradition is our heritage, which was handed down to this day by our ancestors. This is a sign of Kyrgyzness (*bul Kyrgyzdyktyn belgisi*), that is why we observe our traditions. Moreover, when

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<sup>242</sup> Shahrani notes the similarly increasing financial burden of extravagant marriage arrangements in the Pamirs, where young males have started to migrate for work to raise money for their weddings, resulting in a broader pattern of delayed marriages among the Kyrgyz of the Pamir (2002: 262). There is an established market rate for brideprice in different regions of the country, Talas asking for the highest rates. For a discussion of brideprice in the Batken region, see Reeves (2012: 125-130). See Roche and Hohmann (2011), Yalçın-Heckmann (2001), Werner (1997) on the significance of ritual expenditure and ritual gifting among the Tajiks, Azeris and Kazakh respectively.

<sup>243</sup> At least one third of this amount usually returns through cash gifts contributed by the guests. Indeed, compared to living standards in the country, this amount may look extreme. It should be noted that the wedding industry in the country improved so significantly that cafés and restaurants recently started offering all-inclusive *tois*, which include not only food and drinks but also the entertainment, on credit.

poets open the stage, they do so with prayers (*ak-bata*), and if an event starts with *ak-bata*, it will bear good results. An elderly person can also offer prayers, but a poet does so with poetry, to the accompaniment of a *komuz* (*komuzdun koshtoosunda*). With poetry, the *toi* becomes more attractive (*yr menen toidun körkü achylat*). We all give toasts, but we do so in prose (*kara söz menen*), but poets, they sing in heavy and traditional words (*salttuu jana salmaktuu sözdör menen*). A *toi* is not a *toi* without a poet singing at the beginning.<sup>244</sup>

Similar explanations for poetry performances at *tois* suggest that these ritual ceremonies add public validation to the events, as they imply the resilience of a cultural tradition handed down from earlier periods. Observing a pre-revolutionary tradition such as oral poetry in post-Soviet celebrations has become a method of self-representation that is invoked using phrases such as, ‘heritage which was handed down to this day’ and ‘a sign of Kyrgyzzness’<sup>245</sup>, among others. Oral poetry performances have also become part of the display of competitive feasting both within and across kin groups, among colleagues at work and fellow residents in smaller towns.<sup>246</sup>

Currently, the total number of oral poets in Kyrgyzstan is well above two hundred, many of whom live in villages and towns in distant regions.<sup>247</sup> However, for different reasons, approximately sixty regularly attend nationwide poetry competitions, perform on TV and radio, and are well known throughout the country as oral poets. Of these sixty oral poets, around thirty are scattered across the country, living in the southern provinces of Osh and Jalalabad, others in Talas and Issyk-Kul provinces, only a handful of whom earn a living exclusively from poetry performances (the rest are involved in petty trade, agriculture or livestock farming). The remaining thirty oral poets live in the capital city, only three of whom, namely Azamat Bolgonbayev, Aaly Tutkuchev and Amantai Kutmanaliev, work in the State Philharmonics’ national poets section. None of the others has a stable job relevant to their profession.

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<sup>244</sup> Interview with the host of a wedding ceremony in Tokmok, 15/11/2013.

<sup>245</sup> See Zanca (2011: 110-115) for a similar discussion among the Uzbeks.

<sup>246</sup> A typical explanation I heard from so many people who plan to host a *toi* was, ‘All my friends invite poets to their *tois*, and I will also do so, God willing. It’s much more interesting that way’. Moreover, many guests at receptions have told me that they observed the reactions of other guests to the performance of the poet to decide whether or not they should invite the same poet.

<sup>247</sup> I exclude student-poets from these figures. As already mentioned in Chapter 5, around fifty student-poets attend three oral poetry schools in the cities of Bishkek, Osh and Jalalabad, while many more in villages and towns are gifted in improvisation but do not have the means to travel long distances to regional centres to attend these poetry schools.



Plate 19. Shekerbek Adylov, offering his *ak tileks* at a wedding. Bishkek, July 2014.

Some of the oral poets rent produce stalls in bazaars, while others sell dairy products from their livestock. Most of the poets living in Bishkek regularly receive poetry performance bookings from the hosts of ceremonies, this being the main reason for their relocation to the capital, where the *toi* market is enormous. Moreover, residing in Bishkek does not prevent them from travelling to far-off regions, especially when the payment is worth the trip. These thirty oral poets, who depend exclusively on invitations to life-cycle ceremonies, regional or institutional feasts and festivals, can be differentiated further. Around ten of them are considered by the broader public to be celebrities of traditional national culture due their past and recent successes in poetry competitions, and they receive the majority of the



bookings in Bishkek.<sup>248</sup> The rest, who usually charge less for their performances compared to the more popular poets, tend to receive more bookings for ceremonies held in their native regions.

### ***Poets' Remuneration, or 'People feed the Poets'***

During a long conversation with a master oral poet, Shekerbek Adylov (b. 1974), I inquired about his thoughts on possible government support for oral poetry, for example, opening schools in all regions of the country to promote the tradition. Rather tactfully, he pointed to the example of Kazakhstan, where the tradition has been hijacked by the political elite through excessive sponsorship. Although he led a rather humble life for an artist, living in a two-room apartment in a nine-storey late-socialist apartment block in a poor micro-region with his wife and three kids, he said, 'It is better when the people feed the poets' (*Akyndardy eldin bakkany jakshy*), lest they fall prey to the personal and career interests of the politicians.<sup>249</sup> The saying 'people feed the poets' (*akyndyn rysky elden* in Kyrgyz) is a hangover from pre-revolutionary social practices, when oral poets wandered across their regions to sing, and local people would offer gifts such as items of clothing or food to the poets for their performances.

More prominent poets used to serve as the court poets of the local elite; they would accompany them to regional feasts and festivals, and the provisions they received from the elite for their successful performances would include a horse, several sheep and items of clothing, among other things.<sup>250</sup> In the Soviet era, singing didactic, socialist-realist performances in a traditional garment earned the poets the highest salaries among the cultural workers of the State Philharmonics, many of them being made party members, a few even serving as a deputy in the parliament. In the post-Soviet era, however, with the shrinking of state provisions for the broader public, the lives of oral poets have been transformed drastically. The number of poetry ensembles under the State Philharmonics has been reduced to one,

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<sup>248</sup> Jenishbek J., Aaly T., Azamat B., Idiris A., Amantai K., Shekerbek A., Bayan A., Asylbek M., Kubat T., Bolot N. and Jyldyzbek T., among others. Some of these poets are in their early twenties.

<sup>249</sup> Dubuisson (2009, 2010) refers to such sponsorship practices among Kazakh oral poets as a threat to the possibility of poets' 'selling out' their voice, or their 'voicelessness'. See also Light (2008) for a meticulous study of how Uighur *muqam* songs were 'edited' and 'canonized' by the state apparatus and sponsored by the political elite, as they were considered to relate to the ethnic nation and its representation.

<sup>250</sup> A traditional Kyrgyz saying describes the way in which the elite pay their tribute to those who work in their service: '*Üstünö ton kiigizüü, astyna at mingizüü*', which translates as 'offering a garment to put on and a horse to ride'. The garment and horse mentioned in the saying refer to a generalized gift relationship between the two parties.

and some master poets have taken teaching posts at the State Institute of Arts and National Culture, while others have retired, having to survive on a minuscule pension. For these Soviet-era poets, for whom the party resembled the pre-revolutionary courts, the ending of state socialism meant the collapse of their court. One of them, Zamirbek Üsönbayev, born in 1951 and a state artist since 1968, served as the head of the State Philharmonics from 2010 to 2013, when he was removed from his post for political reasons. Zamirbek is the only Soviet-era oral poet who held such a high position in the bureaucracy in the post-Soviet era. This does not mean that the state ignores the poets altogether: outstanding oral poets do receive certificates of appreciation from the state, but such recognition does not offer better life prospects to the poets. From the early 2000s onwards, the younger generation of Kyrgyz oral poets has learned to capitalize on the new opportunities opened up with the ever-growing *toi* industry in the country in the market era. Oral poetry performances have become a symbolic component of *tois*, and oral poets are paid handsomely for their brief solo performances at the beginning of such ceremonies.

The poets' remuneration is seldom discussed unless it is brought up explicitly by the hosts. There are no established rates of remuneration, and it is usually relatives and friends through whom the host learns how much he should pay the poet. The payments for the more famous poets, such as Aaly, Jenishbek and Azamat, were around \$100-\$120 for six to eight-minute performances at the beginning of the ceremonies, which were held in the cafés and restaurants located in Bishkek in 2013 and 2014. If poets had to travel outside Bishkek to nearby towns and cities such as Kant or Tokmok, the expectations regarding payments were higher, and some poets told me that only in those cases would they provide the host with a ballpark figure, usually an additional \$40-\$80 depending on the distance, so that neither party has any regrets afterwards. The poets' payments are not limited to cash, as they are always provided with a *keshik*, a ceremonial food bag and a *kalpak* which the host puts on the poets' heads right after the performance. In some cases, a *chapan* and some flowers are also offered. If the host is a close friend of the poet, a relative or a member of the community of 'culture workers', the poet receives an invitation to attend the wedding as a guest. In such cases, instead of the poet presenting a cash gift to the host, as the other guests are expected to do, he performs free of charge for the host, and neither party pays the other. When I travelled with poets to such celebrations, they usually referred to these *tois* as a *rakhmat toi* or 'thank you *toi*', meaning that they too would be guests at the *toi*.

In rural Kyrgyzstan, when plans are being made to have a *toi*, the host invites a poet who is from the same region. However, regional identities do

not play as large a role in the choice of an oral poet who is invited to events held in the capital. In Bishkek it is more important to hire a famous poet, or one with whom the host identifies, usually in the sense of a religious leaning or political stance, among other factors. Arrangements are usually made months in advance since the poets in Bishkek are extremely busy, especially between August and November, but it is not unusual for a poet to receive a last-minute booking. More often than not, the poet and the host do not know each other personally. In such cases, there are several ways to contact a poet, one being to ask friends and relatives who have previously invited a poet to their events to get the poet's phone numbers, and possibly to inquire how much the poet was paid. Another option is to ask the *tamada* of the event to help contact the poets, as *tamadas* and poets publicize each other's names. Lastly, there are businesses exclusively for *tamadas* and oral poets, such as the one in Bishkek called *Tamada Borboru*, which put hosts and poets in touch with one another, charging the hosts a small fee.

The content of the performance is not left to the poet exclusively, and such arrangements are usually discussed when the host of a ceremony and the poet meet some days prior to the event, although I have also seen many cases when neither party had the time to meet in person, in which case such conversations took place over the phone. Poets usually arrive at the venue thirty minutes before the start of the ceremony. During a brief five-minute conversation with the host of the event, they quickly write down the necessary information about the people the poet is requested to involve in his performance. By the time the *tamada* invites the poet on to the stage, the latter has worked on his lyrics and rhyming patterns, tuned his *komuz*, double-checked his appearance and walked inside from the reception hall. Following the short performance, he leaves the stage amid applause after the host has offered him a *kalpak* and other gifts. The host of the event meets him outside the café, slides an envelope, with the money inside, into his pocket and thanks him by praising his performance.

If the celebration is a birthday anniversary of the *aksakal* of a household, the poet quickly enquires about his professional background, how many children he has and what kinds of achievements he attained in his lifetime, on top of memorizing the names of those who have contributed to the event's organization. In the case of a wedding, for instance, the host informs the poet of the names of the prospective couple, their parents on both sides, their grandparents if they are still alive and attending the event, as well as other prominent relatives who might be contributing generously to the organization of the ceremony. Every poet has a lyrical template of some sort for solo ceremonial performances, which they employ frequently on similar occasions, and which varies a great deal when compared to another

poet. In the weddings, for instance, a poetry performance usually spans six to eight minutes, and it invariably includes the following (though the sequence might differ): remarks greeting the guests; congratulatory statements to the parents of the groom<sup>251</sup>; further praise of the host for inviting *akyns* to the occasion, thus preserving the custom of the Kyrgyz; a description of the 'poor life' of a bachelor before marriage versus extolling the virtues of married life, the importance of family and raising respectful and faithful children; listing the responsibilities of the bride and the groom to each other, their parents and the broader society; and concluding words of good wishes (*ak tilekter*) to the newly married couple. The poets always work witty words and moral messages into the occasion.

It should be noted that it is not always the hosts of the ceremonies who invite the poets; instead, such performances might form part of the gift-giving relations between the hosts and the guests. This happened several times in weddings I observed, where close relatives of the prospective couple had secretly arranged for the poet to perform in advance. As a post-Soviet innovation, this kind of surprise gift was more common with birthday celebrations, called *jubilee toi*, in which case the poet is invited and paid for by either a colleague or the children/ grandchildren of the host.

If the host is a wealthy businessman, he might ask the poet to say a few words about that; if a politician, he might request remarks wishing his continued success. Unlike the highly charged political stage performances, poets never bring politics into their performances at life-cycle ceremonies since these two domains are hermeneutically sealed. Hosts who are very well-off usually invite two poets together to 'open the stage' with a ten-minute duel, in which case the payment is also doubled. An extreme example of such an invitation took place in June 2014, when a wealthy businessman invited Aaly and Jenishbek to perform at his sixtieth birthday celebration in Osh. He initially called Aaly and asked if he and Jenishbek could come and perform together. After gathering all the details about the ceremony, Aaly called Jenishbek to ask about his schedule for the last week of June. I was together with Jenishbek when he received the call. From the big smile on his face, it was obvious that he was happy about the offer, which was for five hundred dollars each, a return ticket to Osh and one night

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<sup>251</sup> Or, those of the bride if it is a *kyz uzatuu toi*, literally, a 'seeing the girl off' ceremony. While it is the responsibility of the groom's family to pay for the entire ceremony, it is becoming more popular for the bride's family to have a separate reception. The main reason for such a trend, as explained to me by many families, is that it is the groom's family that decides how many seats will be allocated to the guests from the bride's side, usually forty to sixty seats out of a total of two to three hundred. Many families want to invite more guests for their daughter's wedding, but are restricted by the groom's family. Similar practices are widespread in Turkey and Azerbaijan: see Yalçın-Heckmann (2001).

at a hotel. Both poets accepted right away. ‘We sang for at least half an hour, which was relatively long, but we had to since we were travelling all the way from Bishkek’, Jenishbek commented upon his return. They were showered with generous gifts not only by the host, but by the other guests as well, for many of whom it was the first time they had been so close to these prominent poets.

Unless they receive a lucrative booking such as the one above, the poets earn around \$100 per performance. In the case of the more famous ones mentioned above, they usually get three to four bookings per week from June to December, a period that boosts their monthly incomes to \$1,500-\$2,000 per month. While this income level is not comparable to the monthly earnings of an average Kyrgyz, the rates fall dramatically when the *toi* season is over.<sup>252</sup> This seasonal fluctuation, which affects their incomes, is one excuse I repeatedly heard from the poets following my comments on their lucrative business during the *toi* season. As one of them reacted,

You don’t understand: this used to be only *shabashka* in the past. All our masters had stable jobs, and necessary conditions for their professional life were set for them. They had holidays; the state sent them to spa centres [*kurort*] when their health deteriorated, and they had pensions. Look at us: we are running after money now [*akcha dep churkaibyz*], which melts away before it sits too long in our pockets.<sup>253</sup>

Such articulations are representative of the opinions of many poets in the era of independence. They cannot help but compare their lives with those of their predecessors or popular singers, whom they usually accuse of making easy money, whereas the poets have to live on *shabashka*.

### ***The Concept of shabashka and the Shame of the Market***

Indeed, this was not the first time I had heard about *shabashka* or moonlighting. Many of my poet friends had told me that their Soviet-era masters would also perform at the life-cycle rituals of local people when the poetry ensembles would travel to the regions. At these unofficial events they would receive *shabashka* or gifts, which might include livestock animals

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<sup>252</sup> There is no reliable information on average monthly incomes in Kyrgyzstan due to unregistered employment, informal payments to employees to avoid additional taxes, etc. However, based on my observations and conversations with the broader public, I would estimate that average monthly incomes fall by between \$200 and \$300 per person among residents of Bishkek.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with a renowned oral poet, 20/01/2014.

and, occasionally, money.<sup>254</sup> *Shabashka* is the name given to the Soviet-era practice of earning an informal income apart from one's official salary, paid in either cash or kind in return for services provided outside regular working hours, a practice which became more and more widespread from the late 1960s onwards. Rogers (2009) suggests that the word derives from *shabash*, a Russian variant of Sabbath, and that *shabashka* originally meant 'time off from work for relaxation or simply quitting work at the end of the day':

With the proliferation of the informal sector of the Soviet economy in the Brezhnev era...*shabashka* increasingly came to refer to all manner of work done outside one's regular employment. Unauthorized moonlighting could be prosecuted in the Soviet era, particularly as moonlighters typically worked harder on their after-hours projects than on their regular jobs and even on occasion offered their moonlighting services at their regular jobs...to make up for their own failure to meet centrally planned quotas during working hours (Rogers 2009: 211).

*Shabashka* was prosecuted as it was regarded contradictory to socialist morality according to the official discourse of the regime, since moonlighting implied greed and a desire to accumulate more wealth and/or resources than one had already been allocated. While the party was the chief patron of oral poetry performances in the Soviet era, 'the people' (*el*) continued to 'feed' the poets through gifts and moonlighting practices.<sup>255</sup> The striking difference between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras for the poets is the fact that what used to be moonlighting earlier has become the main source of income for today's oral poets in the market era.

While those poets who are in their early twenties enjoy popularity at an early age, as well as the cash they receive, master poets like Jenishbek, Azamat and Aaly still consider singing at a *toi* a somewhat shameful activity.<sup>256</sup> These oral poets are well aware of the value of their art, the aesthetic boost that their poetry performances bring to these ceremonies and the distinctive skills of improvisation, as well as its place in traditional Kyrgyz culture. They identify their *oeuvre* with heritage handed down since unknown times and demand respect for themselves accordingly. While they take pride in their rare skills and are happy with the growing popularity of their performances across the country, they frequently make explicit moral comments on their 'having to run after money':

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<sup>254</sup> A poet friend told me that it would also add to the prestige of a local person if he offered a gift high in value to a prominent oral poet following their performances in the regions.

<sup>255</sup> This point is quite significant, as the discourse of the Soviet-era *shabashka* practices of the poets implicitly refers to their offstage performances, discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>256</sup> For a similar commentary on market activities as shameful, see Kaneff (2002).

We are not like popular singers of songs, we are improvising poets (*Biz estrada yrchysy emespiz, biz tökmö akynbyz*). They are playback singers, somebody writes their lyrics, they memorize them, and play them back even when they are invited to *tois*. We sing with our voices and emotions, and our inspiration guides our lines. If we hear someone shouting among the guests, we spontaneously refer to them in our next line: which of those singers can do that?<sup>257</sup>

This awareness of the value of their art is explicitly reflected in their frustrations when, while performing at a ceremony, they notice that some of the guests are continuing to eat, while others are chatting among themselves. When this occurs during a performance, regardless of what the host might think about it, the poets always warn the guests in their lyrics that they are not just ‘singers’ but preservers of a great tradition, to which those eating and chatting are being disrespectful. ‘You see how shameful this is’, one of them confided to me, adding, ‘I just want to halt the performance and leave when such disrespectful people are present among the guests’. When I accompanied poets to the ceremonies to record their performances, during the ride they often told me that, if the host was a member of the political elite, they would simply have to go and perform for money regardless of how much they might dislike the host in real life. ‘There is no way out’ (*aila jok*), they usually remarked, and added that, if they were to start cherry-picking the bookings, it would run counter to their own interests in the long run.

To summarize the argument of the chapter thus far, *aitysh* competitions serve as a springboard for oral poets to display their linguistic, poetic and performance skills on stage to the wider public. These competitions are also rare venues in the sense that oral poets sing about public opinion on the significant social, political and economic problems facing Kyrgyz society. Indeed, the more the oral poets voice criticisms and appeal to the nation on stage, the more they are appreciated for being patriotic and the more their popularity among the public increases. In return, the reputations of the oral poets increase within their own circles and the wider community in general, they being the ones who are most frequently invited to the ritual ceremonies at which they earn their livings. This mechanism works in the circular form of a broader exchange network: politicians do not improve the lives of the people, but the poets reprimand the politicians and uphold the nation, while the people invite the poets to their private ceremonies. This not only sharpens the poets’ language, it also forces them to pay more attention to the everyday lives of the people, to

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<sup>257</sup> Interview with a renowned oral poet, 21/01/2014.

national and international politics, to the various laws passed in parliament, to the state's agreements with foreign governments, to the rising costs of living in the country, to the increasing number of power cuts, etc.<sup>258</sup> At *aitysh* competitions, the oral poets take stock of the political, economic and social developments that have occurred since the preceding *aitysh*; popular topics find their expressions in the language of the oral poets on stage.

While Soviet-era moonlighting practices have expanded in the market era, serving as the main source of income for the poets, the practice of singing at cafés has greater similarities to pre-Soviet practices in that the political elites and businessmen of today resemble the feudal elite of earlier times, and the people providing for the poets exemplify both eras.<sup>259</sup> In between the feudal times and the post-Soviet era, the Soviet period sticks out as the period when oral poetry was systemized and the lives of the oral poets were much easier when compared with the preceding and proceeding eras. Moreover, socialist-realist themes, which prevailed in Soviet-era performances where every single line of oral poetry had to be about the everyday lives of the people strengthened 'the category of the people'. The younger generation of oral poets have been influenced by this Soviet tradition; their success in earning their livings and providing for their families is intricately connected to following this tradition.

## Religion, Politics and the Market

### *Marketing the Heritage: Religion, Politics and the Poets*

In addition to such factors as skilful improvisation, wise and traditionally informed poetry, and the frequency of their appearances on TV, there are other criteria that figure prominently in the success of a Kyrgyz oral poet in the market era. For example, other factors include the poets' political views, religious leanings and strong personal connections with the political elite and businessmen from their native regions. Let me elaborate on this point further by giving examples of two famous oral poets, Elmirebek Imanaliyev and Aaly Tutkuchev. The late Elmirebek (1978-2020) was an apprentice to the older generation of master oral poets, such as Tuuganbai Abdiyev, Estebe Tursunaliyev and Ashyraaly Aitaliyev. He was one of the pioneers of the

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<sup>258</sup> For instance, during my fieldwork, a repeated theme of the performances was Kyrgyzstan's prospective entry into *tamozhennyi soyuz* or the 'Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Community', a policy which many of the poets endorsed at the time. Kyrgyzstan became a member of the Customs Union in May 2015.

<sup>259</sup> My observations on long-term continuity and change with regard to Kyrgyz oral traditions and their patronage resemble the broader post-socialist phenomena elaborated in Humphrey (1991) and Verdery (1996), with their metaphorical references to going back to 'feudalism'.



post-Soviet oral poets. He was from the Toktogul region, where territorial loyalty has recently started to play a stronger role than other parts of the country. The political elite and businessmen from the region provided substantial patronage to the poet, who began performing publicly in 1993, at the age of 16.<sup>260</sup> The fact that his region is named after one of the most famous pre-revolutionary oral poets, Toktogul Satylganov, stimulated the notables in the region to support this young talent. Moreover, Elmirbek's lack of strong Islamic sentiment attracted attention from the more secular segments of society: for example, the promoters of the neo-shamanic *tengrichilik* movement supported him against his more religious rivals.

This became quite evident when an *aitysh* competition was organized as part of the anniversary celebrations for Raikhan Shukurbekov, a Soviet-era writer, in Talas province in November 2013. After meeting A.U., the head of the organizing committee, on the first day that competitions took place in Bishkek, he invited me to accompany him to Talas province and stay overnight at his brother's house in the village where the second day of competitions were to take place. I gladly accepted his offer and accompanied him throughout the festival, which lasted two days. As we chatted during the six-hour trip to the village from Bishkek, A.U., as one of the fervent champions of *tengrichilik*, told me that the tradition of oral poetry was taking roots once again in the era of independence. When I inquired about today's poets, he said I should only pay attention to Elmirbek's and Amantai's performances and, to some degree, Azamat's, but he warned me to stay away from Jenishbek and Aaly:

They are religious; our ancestors were not Muslim, we are 'the people of the Sun' (*kün eli*), and what do these Muslim poets do today, they mix religion in their poetry, they are spoiling the great Kyrgyz tradition (*Kyrgyzdyn uluu saltyn bulgap jatat*). Did you see, Jenishbek did not join these competitions, he knows I would not let him run in the finals, not when I am among the jury members.<sup>261</sup>

Indeed, Jenishbek had relayed the same sentiments to me previously, as he was sure that A.U. would embarrass him by disqualifying him in the early rounds because of his religious views. However, Aaly, who was also an observant Muslim and a native of Talas province, joined the competitions regardless, and following the five-hour competition, which was held in an open field, the last two finalists were Elmirbek and Aaly. Although Elmirbek was his senior, Aaly, as I mentioned in Chapter 6, had been acknowledged as

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<sup>260</sup> When I enquired about sponsorship, many of my poet friends told me that Elmirbek's sponsors had helped him buy his house, although it was not possible to ask him to confirm this.

<sup>261</sup> Interview with A.U., 01/11/2013.

the most patriotic oral poet, having stood up to the attempted humiliations of a Kazakh poet in Astana. In the midst of their duel, when Elmirbek referred to the spirit of the hero Manas and implored its protection, Aaly sternly responded with a vivid description of how Manas had been murdered while praying *namaz* during one of his incursions into Chinese lands. Although both poets were equally skilful in their performances, the jury preferred Elmirbek's performance over Aaly's, meaning that they received the grand prize and first place respectively. Some of the audience members started shouting dissent with the jury's decision, which snowballed into a huge protest. Police officers had to be called in, who had great difficulty in preventing the crowd from approaching the jury members. A.U., along with one deputy and one vice-prime minister from the region, took to the stage together and apologized for any possible misunderstanding. They added that it was more appropriate to extend the hospitality of the region by offering the grand prize to a poet from the Toktogul region.

On our way back to Bishkek, A.U., infuriated by Aaly's depiction of the hero Manas as a religious figure, told me that he and the jury member next to him gave the lowest possible score to Aaly so that Elmirbek would receive the grand prize. Continuing speaking, he then somewhat indiscreetly expressed his anger:

I showed him Allah (*Oshoga Allahty körsöttüm*)!<sup>262</sup> Why would you mention *namaz* while talking about Manas, while Elmirbek was singing so well on *tengrichilik*? Religious epic tellers and poets like this one [Aaly] converted Manas into a Muslim! I do not care if you are a dark-minded person and pray, you cannot sing religion to the people. If you do, then you bear the consequences (*anan birdi körösün*)!<sup>263</sup>

Nevertheless, Aaly was quite satisfied and confessed that he sang what he did quite deliberately: 'If I had brought up the topic of religion in the previous rounds, I knew he [A.U.] would have disqualified me early because of his influence among the jury', he said; 'that's why I waited until the final round!'<sup>264</sup> Indeed, Aaly did not need any more grand prizes; the way he was

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<sup>262</sup> Here A.U. is referring to his punishment of the poet by giving him the lowest score as a member of the jury since he was angry with Aaly for his religious performance. *Körsöttüü*, the Kyrgyz word meaning 'to show', is used in cases of one person trying to prove his strength by humiliating another person.

<sup>263</sup> Interview with A.U., 04/11/2013.

<sup>264</sup> This is not the same as Böribai's performance in Kazakhstan, discussed in Chapter 6. In this case, A.U. could by no means have stopped Aaly's performance short and ask him to leave the stage. What Aaly means here is that, had he sung about religion in the earlier rounds, A.U. would have done the same as in the final round, namely give him low scores and disqualify him. This is exactly why Jenishbek had not taken part in this competition.

explicitly discriminated against by the jury and the reaction of the audience that followed only consolidated his popularity.

Although only six years younger than Jenishbek, Aaly still considers himself to be Jenishbek's apprentice, whom he also chose as his *ökül ata* at the time of his marriage.<sup>265</sup> Aaly is a practicing Muslim, although he is not as forthcoming with his belief as his master. Instead, his fame and admiration among both Kyrgyz and Kazakh derives from his courageous performances against his rivals, politicians and sometimes the people. The fact that he is a native of the 'village of the poets', together with the other legendary poets, is yet another asset Aaly proudly claims for himself. While he is from Talas, he is above and beyond regional and tribal considerations with regard to invitations to life-cycle ceremonies. Known as a 'sharp-tongued' poet (*tili kurch akyn*), Aaly is also a role model for the younger student-poets, since they are well aware that if they want to make progress as oral poets, they will have to increase their popularity through *aitysh* competitions. Aaly is the prime example of a post-Soviet, national 'cultural worker' whose art on stage pays dividends through the extensive demand for his performances among the public. In the following section, I will discuss the biography and everyday life of Aaly's master, Jenishbek Jumakadyr, a contemporary master oral poet whose story is reflective of the poets' fate in the post-Soviet era. His life, too, can be depicted as a microcosm of the changing moral landscape among the broader Kyrgyz public.

### ***On a Master Oral Poet: Jenishbek Jumakadyr, his Early Career and 'Conversion'***

Jenishbek was born in Emgegchi village, in At Bashy region, Naryn Province, on 9 May 1977. That day was also the 32nd anniversary of the Soviet victory in WWII, upon which his father named him 'Jenish', the Kyrgyz for 'victory'. Born into a poor family, he was the fifth of seven children. While his mother worked for the local *kolkhoz*, his father worked as a driver, but was killed in a car accident when Jenishbek was six years old, after which he was brought up by his grandparents. 'As a little child, I was gifted in poetry' (*yrga shyktuu bolchumun*), he stated as he recalled his childhood:

I not only sang poetry, but I used to write too as a school kid and send my poetry to the literary journals for children. In writing lessons, I used to write my composition assignments in verse. At the

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<sup>265</sup> I will elaborate on this in the next section. Here it suffices to note that it is something of a counterpart to the Western idea of a 'godfather'.

age of ten, I took part in regional and national poetry competitions through the encouragement of my teachers.<sup>266</sup>

He started his professional life at the Naryn Music and Drama Theatre after completing 8th grade at the age of fifteen, all the while improving his skills as a poet, a parodist and an actor. This is where he met his master, the oral poet Ashyraaly Aitaliyev, when a poetry ensemble travelled to his region. He performed a ritual greeting of poets for the master poet, *uchurashuu*, upon which Ashyraaly offered his blessings to his new student, gave him the nickname *aftamat*<sup>267</sup> and presented him with a *komuz*, which Jenishbek still plays today. When he travelled with his fellow cultural workers from the Naryn theatre across the country, Jenishbek not only performed poetry and acted, he also served as the master of ceremonies (*alyp baruuchu*) for his ensemble, and today he connects his success as a *tamada*, which I will discuss below, to such practices at an earlier age. Already a regional celebrity, he married quite young, at the age of seventeen. Three years later, at the age of twenty (in 1997), he was among the lucky few recipients of a scholarship who were sent by the Kyrgyz state to study at the Schepkin Institute of Theatre in Moscow. He earned a degree in acting in four years. Having returned from Moscow, he relocated to Bishkek in 2001, and together with some friends, established a theatre, where he worked for a short time. Due to the poor working conditions and low income, however, he finally made the decision to quit. 'I do not remember how many times we moved from one house to another', he said, describing his poor financial situation at the time; 'I, my wife and our daughter lived in a university dormitory during our first year in Bishkek, and then moved in and out like nomads for the next two years'. Since oral poetry competitions were not as frequent at this particular time and performances at life-cycle ceremonies were scarce, Jenishbek struggled greatly as a young talent without a job. His fortune improved, however, when, in 2003, he organized a series of concerts, and with additional financial support from his friends, was able to buy a rather small, two-bedroom apartment in a multi-storey housing complex in Tunguch micro-region, eight kilometres from downtown Bishkek.

A profound change in his personal life occurred over the next couple of years, when he began to question his 'aimless and profane life', as he called it. He began to win grand prizes at *aitysh* competitions, and the growing popularity of his performances turned him into a nationwide celebrity before the age of 25. He was married and had children, but

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<sup>266</sup> Interview with Jenishbek, 23/02/2014.

<sup>267</sup> A common practice within the context of the master-apprentice relationship among the oral poets. *Aftamat*, the Russian word for machine gun, refers to the speed at which Jenishbek improvises. He is still called *aftamat* as the fastest singing Kyrgyz oral poet.

nevertheless he continued his bohemian life, or 'dark ages', as he called those years. As described further in the next section, he then became affiliated with a religious community. After some time he became a devout Muslim, educated himself in the field of religion and began to observe his prayers strictly. At the age of thirty, in 2007, he went on the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca through the sponsorship of his religious community, during which, as he describes it, a miracle happened. Following the tragic death of his first child, a son, when he was just one month old, he and his wife had three more children, all girls. At the time of his pilgrimage, his wife was pregnant with their fourth child. While Jenishbek was travelling on a bus with fellow Kyrgyz on their way from Mecca to Medina to visit the Prophet Mohammad's tomb, he was singing religious songs with a microphone in his hand when all of a sudden he received a text message saying that his fourth child, a boy, had been born, whom he immediately named after the Prophet. 'It was not until after I turned my face to religion that the Creator offered me a son', he commented.

Dramatic changes in his personal life also had profound effects on Jenishbek's professional life. 'My songs became much more serious', he told me, as he drew contrasts with his earlier performances, where he would constantly joke and tease the rival poets on stage, especially if his opponents were female poets. Now, however:

If the audience will not benefit from my performances, then, why would I sing at all, I thought to myself. Alcoholism is a major problem in our society. So many girls are into prostitution. The young is so aimless; they do not respect their own parents, let alone the elderly on the street. I told myself, if I am gifted in oral poetry, then I should not only aim to sing moral messages to the audience, I should also start training my own student-poets to do the same once they grow up.<sup>268</sup>

Initially his newly founded religious perspectives created friction in his relations with the oral poetry school. Sadyk Sher Niyaz, the main sponsor and founder of the school, was a nominal Muslim himself, but he kept his distance from the revival of Islamic sentiments in the wider public. Sadyk appointed Elmirbek to be the school's director, which led to Jenishbek withdrawing from offering voluntary training sessions there. He was the only master oral poet who cut all his ties from the school, which had hitherto been a single, unified community of oral poets in Bishkek. He had already become a member of the religious community, and had for some time been

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<sup>268</sup> Interview with Jenishbek, 23/02/2014.

attending weekly evening meetings<sup>269</sup> with other fellow members. Around four years after his initial acquaintance with this religious community, the latter entrusted Jenishbek with recruiting younger oral poets as part of the community's broader efforts to reshape Kyrgyz society based on moderate Islamic principles. Jenishbek was in his early thirties when he approached some of the student-poets aged between sixteen and twenty, five of who began to attend their master's weekly meetings. In addition, he made arrangements for these student-poets to move into the community's dormitory free of charge so that they could give up living in poor and unaided conditions on their own in rented apartments. Next, Jenishbek formed another weekly meeting circle, which was a combination of older poets and wealthy Kyrgyz businessman. The lives of these poets, whom Jenishbek had successfully attracted to weekly meetings, began to change as well, and they all soon began to strictly observe their daily prayers. A similar change also took place in their performances, as they began to sing more and more on the restoration of Kyrgyz society in line with Islamic values. Currently, it is Jenishbek and Aaly who represent the conservative, Muslim voice among the master oral poets, and a number of younger poets, such as Bayan, among others, are following in their masters' footsteps.

Jenishbek and Aaly were both aware that performing solely at *aitysh* competitions was not enough to get their moral message across. Accordingly Jenishbek soon began to produce and record moral and religious songs on CDs, which received unprecedented attention from the broader public. Soon afterwards, Aaly began to do the same. For many conservative Kyrgyz, Jenishbek and Aaly were representative of ideal artists who were weaving religious messages into their socio-political criticisms of their society in the independence era. Moreover, through a mixture of the Soviet legacy and the recent influence of international earnings and investments in and from the Gulf countries, many Kyrgyz have come to associate embracing Islam with the abandonment of their ethno-national identity and cultural traditions. However, these master oral poets served as role models, especially for the young, in that they can be both patriotic and practising Muslims at the same time, thus showing that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

This was the topic of a long conversation between myself and a taxi-driver while I was travelling to Talas for a regional festival. When I explained that I would be recording poetry performances, the driver swiftly

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<sup>269</sup> This is very similar to Liu's description of *ziyofat* circles among the Uzbeks in Osh (2007: 78-81).

reached for his mp3 player and fast-forwarded it a while until he reached a song by Jenishbek, '*Üch arman*' (three wishes)<sup>270</sup>, adding:

Look at this song, with such beautiful words he mentions the problems in the society. Our ancestors were not alcoholics, but *aksakals* in our villages drink vodka now; how can we ask for prayers from these oldies (*bul chaldardan kantip ak-batasyn surai alabyz*)? No one knows the number of brothels in Bishkek, let alone the groups of girls waiting along the busy streets after midnight. Our society can only get better if more and more poets like Jenishbek sing such messages; after all, they are not pop singers, and it is the responsibility of the poets (*akyndardyn mildeti*) to call people to the right path.<sup>271</sup>

In fact, the phrase *akyndyktyn mildeti* was used in many different contexts by people from diverse social and political backgrounds to refer to the promotion of their visions of a good Kyrgyz society, which was in line with the plurality of the emerging moral landscape in the era of independence.

For Jenishbek, his 'conversion' meant a slight decline in his popularity with certain segments of the population, but he quickly came to be appreciated as a religious master poet among the more religious Kyrgyz, whose numbers have been rising for the last two decades.<sup>272</sup> Similarly, while he continued to receive bookings from clients all over the country, he became the most sought-after poet in religious circles, which had an enormous impact on his income from bookings at life-cycle ceremonies. Moreover, he started putting on individual concerts in Bishkek and the regions during the winter and spring months, a time when the number of bookings for *tois* falls. More and more religious organizations began to invite him to their events on days of religious significance, such as *Mawlut* and the Islamic festivals of *Orozo* and *Kurman ait*. He was invited to Moscow three times, and once to the US by Kyrgyz living there, during my fieldwork.

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<sup>270</sup> This is a famous song of his, the 'three wishes' relating to alcohol, prostitution and ignorance of Kyrgyz language.

<sup>271</sup> Interview with a taxi-driver, 11/07/2014.

<sup>272</sup> Many Kyrgyz have turned to religion within the last two decades, almost simultaneously with religious movements of different denominations penetrating all parts of the country. For discussions of re-Islamisation among the Kyrgyz and its social and political implications, see Heyat (2004), Kuchumkulova (2007) and Isci (2010). For a study of religious conversion among the Kyrgyz, see Pelkmans (2006, 2009) and McBrien and Pelkmans (2008).



Plate 20. Jenishbek Jumakadyr invited to sing at a meeting of imams after their forty days of spiritual journey. Bishkek, September 2014.

As I mentioned in earlier chapters, while Kyrgyz political elites do not actively sponsor oral poetry performances, they do hire oral poets during their election campaigns, which turn into a profitable season for all oral poets in the country. Master oral poets such as Elmirbek, Aaly, Azamat and Jenishbek receive the most attention in the election season. Their regional differences do not play a major role since their popularity has long grown beyond their native regions. During my fieldwork, I never observed poetry performances as part of election campaigns since no elections took place; however, as other poets also said during our interviews, these election campaigns take the form of feasts and festivals across the villages and towns in a province, and oral poetry performances are usually couched within the traditional understanding of a *toi* ceremony. During such occasions, although the poets do not sing exclusively for a particular politician, their endorsement becomes obvious since they accompany the politicians on these occasions.

Jenishbek was approached by the leader of a political party for his election campaign for the October 2010 elections in Talas province. The politician, who was also a wealthy businessman, was barely forty years old when he ran in the elections, and his career as a politician was not as murky as that of his opponents. As Jenishbek explained to me, this was the main reason why he performed across Talas province as part of his election campaigns. As always, money was a pressing issue for the then 33-year-old poet with four children, and he could not decline the offer in five figures for a month-long election campaign:



First of all, if I had declined the offer, another poet would have taken it. Secondly, I do not only consider it as money alone: it also shows that the broader public appreciates my performances, and that's why these politicians approach me first. Do not think the poets sing praises for these politicians in these election campaigns, no. We merely sing our criticisms of the hunger-driven, greedy politicians, I sang so for Bakiyev, and we express our hopes that a fair politician wins the elections. But, the audience gets the point.<sup>273</sup>

Following a successful election campaign, to which Jenishbek contributed through his performances, the politician in question received 13% of the votes in the country. His party took part in the short-lived coalition government formed after this election, in which he served as a deputy prime minister.

Meanwhile, his reputation as a master oral poet and his growing popularity among religious circles have begun to impose additional costs on Jenishbek as well. I was rather surprised to hear him telling me that he was an '*ökül ata*' for nineteen people, three of whom were Kyrgyz from China. This term refers to a form of 'ritualized parenthood' (Ismailbekova 2014), a traditional institution which has rapidly expanded since the early 1990s.<sup>274</sup> Social and economic hardships, as well as the political instability in the country since independence, have led to an increase in the practice of ritual parenthood, since it helps people extend their ritual kin networks. It is either his student-poets or his newly acquainted religious circles that would like to enter into such relationships with Jenishbek. Since it is an honour to be asked to become a prospective couple's ritual parent, it is quite rude to refuse such a request from one's close circle. While the two parties benefit greatly from each other's services, the relationship is a financial burden on the ritual father, the *ökül ata* (also see Ismailbekova 2014: 24-25). Ritual parents are expected to join the groom's family in visiting the prospective bride's house to ask consent for the marriage from the bride's family, to support the groom's family during the negotiations over the brideprice and to play a role in the organization of the wedding ceremony. If their financial conditions allow, they might be expected to contribute to the brideprice payments, as well as covering a percentage of the costs of the wedding reception. At the very least, an *ökül ata* has to offer considerably higher cash gifts in comparison to those offered by the guests during the wedding ceremony. In addition, after the wedding ceremony, the *ökül ata* is

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<sup>273</sup> Interview with Jenishbek, 23/02/2014.

<sup>274</sup> This relationship is less hierarchical nowadays, and the two parties benefit from each other, rather than this being a relation of dependence as 'patron-client' relations suggest. See also Aynakulova (2006: 105-106).

responsible for inviting the newly-weds to a feast, and once the couple are expecting their first child, more gifts should be given on top of the expenses already mentioned. At the time of my fieldwork, Jenishbek had more than twenty ritual grandchildren. Although his many *ökül-bala* have helped him in numerous ways in return, he usually referred to the ritual economy of ritualized parenthood as yet another financial burden: 'I will go bankrupt unless I stop accepting more people', he finally commented.

### ***Between Ethics and the Market: A Precarious Living***

Most oral poets I befriended in the field told me that there was no reason for them to differentiate between their clients; after all, their performances at life-cycle ceremonies had become an indispensable part of the conspicuous consumption of feasts and festivals in the independence era. On the contrary, it is usually the responsibility of the host to hire the right poet according to his social and economic status. While inviting the top five poets in the country is more prestigious and implies higher payments and more gifts for a poetry performance, the exact choice is usually reflective of the host's political views. While most poets do not make explicit moral comments about those for whose ceremony they are performing, this has become a very sensitive issue for Jenishbek following the profound change in his personal life. Whenever he receives a booking, one of the first questions he asks is whether alcohol will be served at the ceremony, as he does not want to perform at such events. If alcohol is to be served he declines the invitation, but only if he has enough bookings from others for his immediate needs. Nonetheless, he always finds himself in a dreadful dilemma between his need for an income and his ethical stance when faced with the decision whether to perform or not at an event where alcohol will be served. He called me one Friday afternoon in August 2014, asking me whether I wanted to join him on a trip to Tokmok, where he would be the *tamada* at a wedding. I accepted the invitation, collected my equipment, and we departed around 3pm in order to arrive at the *toikana* two hours prior to the 6pm starting time. Along the way, I asked him to tell me more about his *tamada* business, but before embarking on that conversation, he preferred to draw my attention first to the broader picture of his financial situation.

Jenishbek already had debts in five figures to various friends for the costs of building his house. His lack of a stable income and his wishful thinking that he would be able to get more and more bookings in exchange for ready cash had led him to depend heavily on the spend-and-borrow economy, through which he was able to build a small, two-storey house, send two of his children to private schools and live like a celebrity while his budget was constantly in the red. On various occasions, he had told me about

several plans he had in mind to boost his income in the winter and spring months. One of his plans was to buy a large piece of land exclusively for selling sand, gravel and soil to companies in the construction industry. While his income from one-time performances at *toi* ceremonies was barely enough to meet his family's daily expenses, he said that the *tamada* business, although rare, was more profitable. He asked a minimum of five hundred dollars for these events, which would last six to seven hours if the *toi* took place in Bishkek, and he charged a hundred more if the ceremony took place outside Bishkek.

At one of our first meetings, Jenishbek asked me whether I could teach him Turkish. In fact Elmirkbek and Aaly had approached me previously with similar requests. Their motivation behind learning Turkish was simple: it was the closest foreign language to Kyrgyz, which might help these poets open up to the wider world:

Kyrgyzstan is a country the size of a palm (*alakandai mamleket*). One third of the people live abroad looking for money, one third are foreigners, and we have less than two million Kyrgyz in the country. Compare that with Turkey! If I become famous in Turkey, that would make me rich; it does not help here. I see people selling my CDs in the bazaar, transporting them in card boxes to Turkey and China, I get nothing from that business.<sup>275</sup>

He dreamed of finding an acting job or starting a traditional stand-up comedy business like the Kyrgyz *kuuduls*<sup>276</sup> in Turkey, or possibly trying his hand at short-story writing, never once doubting his ability to succeed, since he had confidence in his skills. 'There is no respect for art in our country', he said once, referring to the copyright issues that discouraged him from producing any more CDs. 'The CDs of playback artists are also in the bazaar, or online, but they get paid at least five times more for a song they sing at a ceremony, and it's not their real voice!' Jenishbek's frustration resulted from the very issues that had made him a celebrity: he knew that his linguistic and artistic skills were bound up with his native language, and no matter how hard he tried he could not improvise as an *aftamat* in a foreign language. Thus, it was not possible for him to extend the traditional authority of *tökmö akynchylyk* across the borders of this tiny Central Asian country.

Jenishbek attributed his success in the *tamada* business to his background in acting. Indeed, I never heard any other master oral poet talk about serving as a *tamada*, for which one not only needs the skills to lead the

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<sup>275</sup> Interview with Jenishbek, 16/08/2013.

<sup>276</sup> *Kuudul* is the name of a traditional Kyrgyz comedian. The art of *kuudul* grew out of a storytelling tradition, a prominent element in Kyrgyz oral traditions. See Bellér-Hann and Sharshenova (2011) for a glimpse of trickster tales among the Kyrgyz.

event, but also to entertain the guests with various games, singing songs and telling anecdotes, while keeping the event going with toasts and other features of the ceremony. Half-way through our conversation on the way to Tokmok, Jenishbek's voice grew grimmer as if he wanted to say something serious, but was too shy to continue. 'Let me stop the car here for ten minutes', he said, pulling over to the side of the road by a mosque to do his afternoon prayers. 'I performed ablutions at home, so, it should be quick', he added. As he started the car upon his return, he continued, 'It's always painful for me to decide how to react', he muttered, 'to decide how to respond when they inform me that alcohol will be served at *tois*'. It was already clear to me that the *toi* we were heading to would not be alcohol-free, and Jenishbek was at pains to tell me how hard it was for him to tolerate such an environment and lead the ceremony at the same time. His eyes were red, as if he was about to burst into tears, since he could not explain it to himself; it was not only against his religious beliefs, it also contradicted the new public image he had created for himself. He was also afraid to give his student-poets the wrong impression that he endorsed performing at *tois* where alcohol is served. His dilemma between his need for money and his contempt for alcohol was obvious from his face throughout the entire event, during which he barely smiled. We scarcely exchanged words on our return after the event.

### **Conclusion: Heritage Enters the Market**

Oral poetry performances have become part and parcel of the ritual economy of post-Soviet ceremonies among the Kyrgyz. Inviting a poet to a ceremony not only adds to the host's prestige and cultural capital, as a ritual component it also adds public validation to the ceremonial event. This is due to a nascent understanding among the Kyrgyz that whenever possible pre-Soviet era customs have to be observed to restore the Kyrgyzness of the nation in the independence era. The conspicuous consumption surrounding the *tois* has boosted the wedding industry in the capital, as well as in provincial capitals, and a credit economy has taken off in response to the growing public demand for luxurious ceremonies, as the budgets of the prospective hosts of events do not permit such extravagance. Lacking proper employment for the last two decades, oral poets, who used to be prestigious culture workers of the socialist era, soon learned to capitalize on the new opportunities available in the market era.

Booking performances at life-cycle ceremonies and other public and institutional festivals, or simply *tois*, has become the major component of their income, and they have developed a spend-and-borrow economy, relying extensively on 'the people' to make ends meet. Although oral poets

are paid handsomely for their relatively short performances, they suffer from seasonal fluctuations in their incomes. Their aspirations to live like celebrities contradict the realities of the market. Moreover, while their inclusion in various religious or political circles increases their prospects of becoming more popular and earning more, these newly established relations entail different sorts of financial burden, as in the case of Jenishbek's involvement with ritualized parenthood. While 'running after money' is despised as a shameful market activity, poets do not have any alternative but to resort to 'the people' due to a lack of state sponsorship and of proper acknowledgement of their art as a prominent cultural heritage which should be promoted. While many oral poets would like to spread their popularity across the borders to other countries, none has been able to do so, since their expertise is bound up with the Kyrgyz language, traditions and cultural values. Against their personal ethics, they feel obliged to perform at any given opportunity so that they do not lose out in the market.

Popular *aitysh* competitions have turned out to be ideal occasions for boosting one's popularity among the public, being virtually the only way to spread one's name as a popular poet of the people (*belgüliüü/ aityluu el akyny*), since these performances are covered extensively by the media. Oral poets realized themselves that whoever gave voice to 'public opinion' and took sides with the people will be sought after in the *toi* industry. This trend has quickly caught on among the poets, whose performances have become exclusively a domain of sociopolitical criticism, through which the community of oral poets collectively condemns social evils of all sorts. They implore the people that the Kyrgyz 'shall be famous with their poetry, not with their anarchy' (*jyry menen taanylbai, yry menen taanylsyn*).

In this chapter I have argued that, in the aftermath of state socialism's collapse, oral poetry performances among the Kyrgyz have become a prominent mechanism, not only in safeguarding the interests of ordinary people against the state apparatus, but also in cautioning them against improper practices, regardless of the personal motivations of the poets themselves. To repeat the tactful message of the poet as discussed earlier in the chapter, most poets prefer to be fed by the people rather than the politicians. This is particularly significant in that it allows the poets to sing free of the pressures of patronage and to remain relatively objective, being situated squarely between the people and the politicians. The oral poets are also well aware that only in this way can they claim to be the voice of the ancestors.

Heritage in the market, as I also argued in this chapter, proves the resilience of a tradition and the abilities of its preservers to adapt to the new social, political and economic conditions. While it was because of state

intervention through cultural management that oral poetry performances survived the Soviet era, it is the lack of the state's involvement in the post-Soviet era that enables Kyrgyz society to regulate itself in dealing with the perils of the market era. In this regard, a sustained attention to oral poetry performances in the post-Soviet era reveals the broader links between the economy, morality and politics that are embedded in the social life of the Kyrgyz.



## ***Chapter 8***

### **Conclusion**

The preceding pages have presented a long-term analysis of a particular cultural performance among the Central Asian Kyrgyz. Its peculiarity stems from the fact that, whereas its form, performance and methods of composition are rooted in time-honoured traditions, the lyrics sung by the poets have to be spontaneously improvised, a process which is bound up with the broader social context of the performance. This characteristic of the genre reaches beyond theoretical considerations of the homeostatic quality of oral traditions developed in Goody and Watt (1963) as reviewed in Chapter 1, since the subject matter is not a body of poetry in which the lyrics change across time and space, nor is it the process of the canonization of a genre. Under the traditional garment, an oral poet sings new and topical lines each and every time he performs, without repeating a performance twice. This is the main reason why improvised oral poetry performances, or *tökmö akynchylyk*, have remained popular among the Kyrgyz and why their performers have been much sought after by political establishments over the centuries.

As discussed in Chapter 2, by virtue of their skills in improvisation and oratorical speech and their prowess as masters of a rich body of revered oral traditions, master oral poets were the embodiment of traditional authority in their communities – they were public orators and mediators during conflicts, who also served as advisers, emissaries and court poets for the local tribal elite. Moreover, their poetry duels were prominent components of competitive feasting among neighbouring peoples, and victorious performances increased the prestige of their communities. Hence, pre-revolutionary oral poets were heavily embedded in the social and political life around them, and the messages conveyed in their performances were intimately linked with the circumstances in which they had been created and performed. In the early decades of the Bolshevik Revolution, when extant cultural resources were regarded as the basis of the new proletarian culture, these cultural performances were incorporated into the



policies of building the new Soviet person. More than anything else, it was the biography of the master oral poet Toktogul, heavily edited and reconstructed by the Communist Party, which provided the ideal cue to convert traditional oral poetry performances into a political tool in the party's service.

I discussed the remarkable similarities and changes oral poetry performances underwent in the Soviet era in Chapter 3. Soviet-era performances were modelled on the example of pre-revolutionary practices, especially with regard to their didactic style. Similarly, the organic links through which these performances were tightly linked to the social life of the Kyrgyz also remained unchanged. However, these traditional performances were modernized and reinvented as Soviet educational and enlightenment institutions. The traditional authority of the poets was supplemented with the prestigious status of cultural worker endowed by the party. Employed at the State Philharmonics in the capital city, each poet's plush garments were ornamented with a variety of medals and rewards. Oral poets were no longer wandering minstrels, but were organized into oral poetry ensembles and provided with concert plans with which to criss-cross the country for ten months of the year. Competitive feasting between the pre-revolutionary elite, then condemned as *kulaks*, now took place between the collective and state farms in the spirit of socialist competition. The process of transforming the court poets of the pre-revolutionary era into the party's poets in the Soviet era was facilitated by means of in-house training seminars at the State Philharmonics, and oral poets soon became well versed in the language of socialism.

Archival research into early Soviet-era performances also brought out a significant change that was introduced into these performances: improvisation was longer permitted, and the lyrics of the performances had to be approved before they were staged. Moreover, without prior approval by the relevant authorities, oral poets' public performances, whether in clubs, theatres or in the vast open fields, were strictly forbidden, a process I called the 'collectivization of the arts'. The fact that oral poets were no longer allowed to improvise did not mean that they repeated their performances: they were tasked with singing in close conformity with the regional reports that were summarized to them by the administration of the State Philharmonics. Despite the arguments of folklore scholars condemning Soviet-era folk performances wholesale as 'pseudo-folklore' or 'fakelore', I consider Kyrgyz oral poets' annexation by the discourse of the socialist modernization project to have been a much more complex process. After all, Kyrgyz oral poets had previously been improvising songs on the social and political circumstances of their communities, and their conversion into the

poets of the party was not seen as peculiar due to their time-honoured status as intermediaries between the political establishment and the people. The moral messages sung by Arstanbek or Kalygul, among other master oral poets, were similarly replaced by performances giving voice to the significant aspects of socialist morality – hard work, hygiene, abandoning feudal *as well as* religious practices and ‘crimes of custom’, transformation of *byt*, building a socialist morality and cultivating the new Soviet person. Oral poets were mobilized among the rural Kyrgyz, where the party had the least foothold, and they were now the party’s ‘local allies’, the missing link between the modernizing centre and the ‘backward’ periphery. By translating the language of the party into the vernacular, oral poets became ‘cultural revolutionaries’ under the traditional cloak.

Alternative historical accounts, discussed in Chapter 4, suggest that the process of institutionalizing oral poetry was not as neat as the official language of the party claimed. The schedules of the oral poetry ensembles were structured as lengthy trips far away from the capital city, allowing oral poets to spend extended periods of time in rural Kyrgyzstan. On their journeys to distant regions of the country, the local inhabitants of state and collective farms warmly welcomed the oral poetry ensembles as honourable guests. While the oral poets fulfilled their ‘concert plans’ during the daytime, they performed epics, legends and folk songs during informal gatherings with rural Kyrgyz off the socialist stage, a practice that was strictly forbidden by the party. The findings suggest that, while the party’s socialist cultural revolution was successful in many ways, it was nevertheless constantly negotiated, accommodated and domesticated in the peripheries of the Soviet state. Moreover, state socialism’s policies in many respects ‘sponsored’ a sense of cultural continuity with the past without strong explicit intentions, a process I call ‘state-sponsored traditionalism’. This point is important, since ‘state-sponsored traditionalism’ as a process does not contradict the established literature on ‘state-sponsored evolution’, a byword for the study of the Soviet politics of nationality. Rather, it offers a complementary perspective on it, revealing the full complexity of Soviet-style modernization. The Soviet state’s policies attempted to incorporate the traditional elements of local communities, such as oral poetry performances, as representative of a new proletarian culture built on the older tradition, as has been explored on the literature on *korenizatsiia* and ‘cultural *korenizatsiia*’ to some extent. Yet, the novelty of the central argument in Chapter 4 is that the same policies allowed the locals to convert oral poets from ‘cultural workers’ back into ‘the voices of the ancestors’. Thus, the findings on the Soviet history of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances can be summarized as follows. First, as the language of socialist modernity was

couched in the vernacular, it was not completely alien to rural Kyrgyz. Secondly, despite the ambitious language of the party, socialist modernity was not necessarily implemented top-down, but was negotiated and accommodated in a variety of ways. Thus, the present study suggests that the Soviet experience could alternatively be analysed as a modernization project that was 'collaboratively constructed'.

The remaining three chapters documented the revival of oral poetry performances in the era of independence. Chapter 5 offered a thorough analysis of a performance to demonstrate the dynamic interaction between these cultural performances and the current political establishment. It contrasted the Kyrgyz case with the regional literature on the post-Soviet states' exercise of power on their citizens through cultural production and the political elite's sponsorship of their nations' cultural heritage. Moreover, it summarized the strategies oral poets pursued to justify the claim that they themselves are the true representatives of the nation by locating themselves between 'the people' and 'politicians'. Finally, it attempted to complicate the discourse of 'retraditionalization' in former Soviet Central Asia by juxtaposing the two central characteristics of Kyrgyz oral poetry performances, improvisation and tradition, and asked how improvised poetry can be labelled as traditional and revered as such when the poets themselves sing about the 'perils of postsocialism'.

In Chapter 6, I elaborated on three oral poetry competitions, locating them in broader discussions of national identity in Kyrgyzstan following the collapse of state socialism. As part of these discussions, I advanced the concept of 'frustrated nationalism' to describe the suspension of the systematic state promotion of ethno-national identities which had been created, maintained and heavily sponsored during the Soviet era.

Chapter 7 explored the social life of oral poets beyond the stage, taking as an example the most famous Kyrgyz oral poet. Having discussed the court poets of the pre-revolutionary era and the party poets of the Soviet era in the earlier chapters, I documented the post-Soviet experience of oral poets through a discussion of the marketization of heritage. Elaborating on the political economy of oral poetry performances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, I discussed how the cultural workers of the past have turned into poets for hire.

While these performances are praised as the nation's unique cultural heritage in the era of independence, for many Kyrgyz they are distinctively a 'Kyrgyz conversation' about the nation. They present the image of the nation to the broader Kyrgyz public, rather than treating it as 'a ritual for others'. On the one hand, oral poets contribute to the 'wooden talk of nationalism' when referencing a vague 'proud past' and 'great future' for the nation; their

coverage of Kyrgyzstan's present, on the other hand, is uniformly grim. In their performances, the lyrics of the oral poets are peppered with sentiments of 'frustrated nationalism' when referencing the current social, economic and political conditions with which Kyrgyzstan has struggled since independence. When performing, oral poets appear as fervently nationalist cultural workers who strategically claim to be voicing 'public opinion', while at the same time they contribute to the formation and shaping of that opinion. The traditional authority of Kyrgyz oral poets, re-acknowledged in independent Kyrgyzstan, permits a degree of 'ritual rudeness' on stage, and oral poets voicing their criticisms enjoy a high degree of 'cultural permission', which is explored through Mauss's concept of 'agonistic giving' (1990) and Gluckman's 'rituals of rebellion' (1954). An oral poet's ability to speak truth to power publicly not only consolidates Kyrgyz people's respect for their age-old traditions, it also promotes this cultural performance as reverberating the voice of ancestors at the present day, rather than as an individual composition by the poet. Those poets who often improvise on the country's severe circumstances accordingly grow in popularity among the public.

Although this work is by no means a product of applied anthropology, it implies several practical outcomes that I would now like to turn to. I argue that there are lessons to be learned from the cultural history of these performances in the Soviet era. I do not suggest that the Soviet state's monopoly of the process of cultural production should be replicated in the post-Soviet era, as in Uzbekistan, for example, explored in Adams (2010). Nonetheless I argue for a more ethnographically grounded vision of modernity, a perspective that is lacking in the post-Soviet era, which is exemplified in the discourse of projects to build civil society, as well as in the alien language of 'transition', with its teleological baggage. The aim of Chapters 5 and 6 is to draw attention to the possibility that Kyrgyz oral poetry performances could alternatively be considered as inspiring cohesion and trust and as fostering a sense of moral community, more so than Western models of building civil society that has busied the transition agenda so far. Thus, I argue for a broader definition of civil society, especially with reference to local beliefs and practices which look dissimilar from Western institutional models while at the same time bearing their 'normative appeal' (Hann and Dunn 1996). It should be noted that imposing the alien language of transition does not render the Western initiative less disruptive of the realities of a given society than was state socialism in the Soviet era. Rather, the ethnographic realities on the ground suggest that the normative appeal of Western institutional models could be promoted as an alternative, instead of extracting them from the cultural and intellectual history of the West and

transferring them into the post-Soviet space. In the era of the market, the valued importance of these extant cultural resources is not acknowledged by the state and non-state actors. As I showed in Chapter 7, oral poets find themselves abandoned to their fates: while some of them earn their livings through different employments and sing only occasionally, the more popular ones have turned into poets for hire. This process bears a striking similarity to the phenomenon of ‘cultural dispossession’ analysed by Creed (2011).

As for the implications of the present study on the developing anthropological literature on post-Soviet Central Asia, I suggest that the cultural performances explored in this work point to the manifestation of quite different dynamics in Kyrgyzstan with regard to the role of the state in the process of post-Soviet cultural production in comparison to other Central Asian republics, notably Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (and Azerbaijan, for that matter). These dynamics are visible in my discussion of oral poetry performances, most notably in Chapters 5 and 6. Contrary to the more authoritarian political climates of the regional republics, where the political elite secured a Soviet-style monopoly over the domains of the economy, politics and cultural production in the post-Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan has made a name for itself as the most liberal country in post-Soviet Central Asia, having implemented rigorous political and economic reforms from the earliest years of independence. However, due mainly to the liberal atmosphere in the country, the Kyrgyz state has recently been characterized by the broader public as lacking a proper political ideology. While the significance of the independent state is deeply acknowledged among the Kyrgyz, many believe that the politics of transition of the last two decades have brought about the decay and degeneration of Kyrgyz society. Similarly, the discourse of decay and degeneration is voiced most loudly by Kyrgyz oral poets through their popular performances.

As in Humphrey’s analysis of the Mongolian case (1992), among the Kyrgyz the moral authority of the present is rooted in its historical origin. However, unlike the Mongols, the Kyrgyz do not cast their Soviet past as foreign, and their assessments of the formidable social and political conditions of independent Kyrgyzstan are usually juxtaposed to their shared history in the Soviet Union. Although there is recourse to an earlier era, to a ‘deep past’ in the self-representation of the Kyrgyz for the last two decades, the pre-revolutionary and Soviet eras are not hermeneutically sealed off from this self-representation. The phrase ‘Kyrgyz civilization’ (*Kyrgyz madaniyaty*) is used with reference to ‘traditional Kyrgyz national culture’, the basis of which is considered to be rooted in ‘time immemorial’; as such, it was reinvented and systematically maintained in the Soviet era. I argue that such complexities of resilience and transformation can best be captured

through a long-term historical perspective, which will help overcome the restrictive structures of a synchronic ethnographic study. Thus, an informed ethnography of the contemporary post-Soviet world not only requires us to revisit the socialist period; what is equally important is to trace the agenda of resilience and transformation, and of social change, back to the pre-Soviet era.

I remarked in the Introduction of this manuscript that, out of a rich body of oral traditions among the Kyrgyz, only the heroic epics have received sustained scholarly attention from Western scholars since the mid-nineteenth century. A similar trend is also noticeable among today's political elite in Kyrgyzstan, where the state promotes heroic epics as the authentic representation of Kyrgyz cultural and political history. I have argued, however, that the cultural performances explored in the present study have not only been part and parcel of rituals and celebrations, moral and political language, they have also been an intimate and integrative element of everyday social life in the long-term history of the Kyrgyz, more so than the epics.

As archival research has become relatively more accessible in post-Soviet countries in the last two decades, it is now an urgent matter to pay attention to such elements of everyday social life in the peripheries of the Soviet state, as well as to the continuity and change of their nature and practice across time. In the Kyrgyz case, the tribal elite of the pre-revolutionary era and the party in the Soviet era extensively utilized oral poetry performances as influential political instruments. In the present era too, oral poets caution the masses against revolutions and popular demonstrations, or simply the chaos with which Kyrgyzstan has become infamous, lest, as the poets often remark, 'Kyrgyzstan shall be known for its songs, not for its chaos' (*jyry menen taanylbai, yry menen taanylsyn*). A comparative study of the place of similar cultural performances in the long-term history of the region would also be instructive, especially with regard to how these performances are not only embedded in the social, political and economic life of the given society, but also through the ways in which they have served as a catalyst for social change for diverse actors with different agendas. Such research would also be instructive in further complicating the discourse of the revival of traditions or of retraditionalization as a peculiar post-Soviet phenomenon. One such study among the Kyrgyz is the semi-legal judicial institutions of the so-called *Aksakal* Courts, introduced in the early years of independence and explored by Beyer (2016). Alenkina (2015) recently suggested that these courts can be traced back to the 'Comrades' Courts' (*tovarishcheskii sud*) of the Soviet era, rather than being a more ancient practice with pre-revolutionary roots, as its name implies.

‘If there is no singing, there is chaos’ (*Yr chykbasa jyr chykāt*). This proverb has become a cliché sung by Kyrgyz oral poets during their performances. While it serves to promote their profession, I consider this proverb, in the words of Vansina (1965), to be an item from ‘the storehouse of the wisdom of ancestors’, and conclude that it serves as a fair summing up of the present study. With reference to the central question this project has set out to explore, I argue that Kyrgyz oral poets and their performances have been part of the soft power of various political establishments in the history of the Kyrgyz, especially through their unique features as both ‘traditional’ and ‘improvisational’. In line with Bloch (1975), the power of these performances stems from the formalized, oratorical and poetic speech that oral poets improvise, under the cloak of tradition, as the voice of the ancestors.

## Appendix 1

### Kyrgyz poems in the text

- (ch. 2, p. 40)      *Tishin barda tash chayna,  
Ar ishti kylgyn küch barda,  
Saga kerek ookat, ash kaida?  
Jalkooluk tübü kuuratat,  
Emgektensen, zor paida.*
- (ch. 2, p. 40)      *O balam, kölsüz jerde kuu bolboit,  
Chataksyz jerde chuu bolboit,  
Jenilgen khanda tuu bolboit,  
Möngüsüz tördö suu bolboit,  
Chaksy-chatyk kishinin,  
Sözdöründö uu bolboit,  
Degen söz bolsun esinde,  
Keregi tiet kezinde.*
- (ch. 2, p. 52)      *Malyndy aityp maktanba,  
Köp Kazakka attanba,  
Kazaktyn malyn alasyn,  
Kak talaada kalasyn.*
- (ch. 2, p. 52)      *Orus alat jerindi,  
Syndyrat senin belindi,  
Uga жүргүн kebindi,  
Taap koyot ebindi.*
- (ch. 2, p. 53)      *Jygach bolso tabylar,  
Kiyiz bolso jabylar,  
Oi, Sarbagysh tuugandar,  
Bugunu üch bölüntsön,  
Esenkuldun Ormonu,  
Emi kaidan tabylar?  
Chabuuldan Bugu ölchü emes,  
Oi, Sarbagysh tuugandar,*



*Esenkuldun Ormonu  
Tirilip kaira kelchü emes.*

(ch. 2, p. 53)

*Elibizden ajyrap,  
Elik bolup turabyz.  
Kaptap tüzdü kötörgön,  
Kölük bolup turabyz.  
Bashka chapsa bylk etpes,  
Ölük bolup turabyz.*

(ch. 2, p. 54)

*Kabaryn küngö ketse da,  
Jyldyzga kolun jetse da,  
Jaratkandyn düinösü  
Büt koluna ötsö da,  
El menen sen biyiksin,  
Elden chyksan, kiyiksin.*

(ch. 2, p. 61)

*Basyp jegen kalkymdy,  
Bai-manaptar kuuldu.  
Aty kedei baldary,  
Artyndan shorun juuldu.  
Nikolai nanyn jegender,  
Amalyn tappai muundu.  
Panardai janyp boshtonduk,  
Baktybyzga tuuldu.  
Kandai aial tuudu eken,  
Lenindei uuldu!*

(ch. 3, p. 93)

*Poezd minip bardym dep,  
Ishengis kepti sen aittyn.  
Özümdön uluu agandy,  
Tamasha kylba, jön aitkyn.  
Osmonkul, poezd degenin,  
Jelmayandai töö beken?  
Oshoncho kishi kötörgön,  
Jomoktoghu döö beken?  
Kichüü da bolson özümdön,*

*Körgönün senin köp eken.  
 Poyuzundu süirögön,  
 Kadimkidei at beken?  
 Biz minip jürgön attardan,  
 Churkagany bat beken?  
 On chakty adam birigip,  
 Anyna kantip batty eken?  
 Kyinalbai baikush, kairan at,  
 Silerdi kantip tartty eken?  
 Oilonboi aitchy chynyndy,  
 Je, osho sözün kalp beken?*

(ch. 3, p. 96)

*Kyl kybyryn tazalap,  
 Alysh kerek sakaldy.  
 Kyrgydai sylap kulpuntup,  
 Bagysh gerek sakaldy.  
 Byiyl kördüm jaiynda,  
 Kegetinin saiynnda,  
 Senin bir jakyn tuuganyyn,  
 Sakalyna tan kaldym,  
 Tizesindei buuranyn.  
 Közü aran jylytyrait,  
 Körsötpöi baskan kulagyn.  
 Ismail, tuugandarynda,  
 Tazalyk degen takyr jok.  
 Tartibindi süilödüm,  
 Talasha turgan akyn jok.*

(ch. 3, p. 96)

*Agasy eköo küzündö,  
 At chapyryp ash berdi.  
 Chygymyn tarttyk chyrkyrap,  
 Torpokton toguz bash berdi.  
 Oshentip jürüp bulardyn,  
 Ui plany tolgon jok.  
 Ash menen toi dep jürüp,  
 Aiylga torpok koigon jok.  
 Kolhozgo ötchü mal ele,  
 Kagazy turat dagy ele,  
 Torpaktor osho boidon jok.*

(ch. 3, p. 97)

*Elibiz eski oorudan,  
Kutulup sonun el boldu.  
Ayal-erkek baarynyn,  
Ukuktary ten boldu.  
Uul-kyzy Kyrgyzdyn,  
Ushunchalyk ösköndö,  
Kominizmdin joluna,  
Kadam koyup ötköndö,  
Ismaildin agasy  
Ekiden ayal alaby?  
Partiya menen ökmöttün  
Myndai emes talaby.  
Emi, Chake, bularga,  
Özün koldon charany.*

(ch. 3, p. 98)

*Kabaryn uktun bekensin,  
Oshtun kandai bolgonun?  
Ukpasan emi menden uk,  
Jalalabattan Osh kaldy,  
Jaryshka jetpei, bosh kaldy.*

(ch. 3, p. 98)

*Elibiz shaiyr, epkindüü,  
Emgektin jolun tüshüngön.  
Bergen antyn aktoogo,  
Bel bailashyp kütüüngön,  
Jalalabad Osh emes.  
Dalaidyn östü salmagy,  
Arpa, buudai, ak kürüch,  
Emgekke tundu aimagy.  
Oblasttan baigege,  
Otuz min tenge algany.  
Kolunda turat al tügül,  
Kyrgyzdyn Kyzyl bairagy.*

(ch. 3, p. 98-99)

*Kyzyl Meenet, Kyzyl Shark,  
Kyrgyz el üchün kyiyn dank.  
Tolkusa toodoi küchü bar,  
Toko, tizginindi jyia tart.*

*Kördün beken, jan Toko,  
Bizdin Oshtun aimagyn?  
“Nariman” degen bir kolkhoz,  
Samalot satyp alganyn?  
Batyshta joonu talkalap,  
Baryp berdi jardamyn.  
Bailygyn ashkan el bolson,  
Bar beken senin andaiyn?*

(ch. 3, p. 100)

*Eliü jyl da el jany,  
Elden uktum men dagy.  
Karylardan kalgan söz,  
Kabaryn bardyr sen dagy.  
Baiyrkydan bul kündö,  
Bashkacha östü el dagy.  
Tabigyı türün özgörüp,  
Tanylgys sonun jer jany.  
Echen kylum katmarlap,  
El ötkön eken karangy.  
Padysha khandyn doorunda,  
Baigege saigan adamdy.  
Körböi ketti osholor,  
Könüldüü, erkin zamandy.*

(ch. 3, p. 100)

*Akylmany adamdyn  
Asyl Ilyich jaraldy.  
Kan sorguch menen karmashyp,  
Ajylar menen arbashyp,  
Ört aralap, kan kechip,  
Öchürüp бүтін alardy,  
Alyp berdi elime,  
Akyikat, tendik zamandy.*

(ch. 3, p. 101)

*Eliü jyl da elibiz  
Echendi oilop chykardy.  
Zavod, fabrik, baarynan,  
Zor jenish boldu abdan.  
Ailanyp uchkan bizdin küch,*

*Aidyn ary jagynan.  
Erkin door, nur zaman,  
Eliiügö chykty janydan.*

(ch. 3, p. 101)

*Eliiü jyl dyn ichinde,  
Eldin salty onoldu.  
Eskichilik feodal,  
Een bashtyk jogoldu.  
Ayal-erkek, barynyn,  
Ukuktary ten boldu.  
Baardy k jagy jetishken,  
Baktyluu Sovet el boldu.  
Soyuzduk Kyrgyz el bolup,  
Salmagy elge ten boldu.  
Kysyktary takyr arylyp,  
Kyshtagy, shaary janyryp,  
Eliiü jyl da elibiz,  
Emgegin arnap, kamdandy.  
Tarbiyaluu el bolup,  
Tazalykka ailandy.  
Tolup jatkan ish menen,  
Toodoi tolkun küch menen,  
Tosup aldy mairamdy.*

(ch. 4, p. 120-121)

*Keldi dep köp el choguldu,  
Kündüzü oyun koyuldu.  
Maaryttynar katkыryp,  
Marks kolkhoz tobundu.  
Kubany kolkhoz ai yly,  
Agyzsan tilden balyny,  
Tanshytyp aityp yr menen,  
Taralyp jatkan jany ny.  
Tynch zaman menen kuttuktap,  
Baldaryn aman keldi dep,  
Balkytyp chökkön kary ny.  
Kelinderdi kubantyp,  
Kördün dep algan jary ny.  
Süyünüch basty sizdi da,  
Basylyp sogush jalyny.*

*Keneship ketmen chapkanga,  
 Nasaatyn aityp jashtarga.  
 Suroo sonuz küchötüp,  
 Dem berip charba bakkanga.  
 Chettetip eldi til menen,  
 Jai jok dep ishsiz jatkanga.  
 Emgek kyl, elge, keldin dep  
 Sogushtan aman kaitkanga.*

(ch. 4, p. 121) *Zamanyn uchkul kanattuu,  
 El-jurt jalpy sabattuu.  
 Ar kimisi özüünün,  
 Kesibine talanttuu.*

(ch. 4, p. 123-124) *Atan Manas aйтkandai,  
 “Bir künü aldyn körsötüp,  
 Bir künü artyn körsötüp,  
 Ötүp ketet дүнүү.”  
 Jetken emes ech adam,  
 Дүнүюнүн түбүнө.  
 Koomanym,  
 Kele berbeit emespi,  
 Mendei meiman күнүгө.*

(ch. 4, p. 124) *Kichi Jegat, chon Jegat,  
 Ortosu teren kapchygai.  
 Bir körgön kishi tim ele,  
 Bir tünöböy kachchudai.  
 On eki türkүн til bilet,  
 Tuugandar,  
 Silerden körök chakchygai!*

(ch. 5, p. 152) *Chondordun arasynan en algachky,  
 Kamila eje ajyga bardynyz by?  
 Jaratkandan suranyp jakshy tilek,  
 Kaigy-mun Kyrgyzdyn saldynyz by?  
 Al jerden uluulardyn aitkan kebin,*

*Urmat kylyp, göödöngö taktynyz by?  
 Kyrgyzdardyn kaigysyn körüp turgan,  
 Bir Kudaiga yi menen chachtynyz by?  
 Suluuluguna suktanyp Mekke shaardyn,  
 Je emne, turist bolup kaittynyz by?*

(ch. 5, p. 153)

*Akyndar el namysyn saktai jüröt,  
 Akimder ailalaryn tappai jüröt.  
 Akyndar akyikatty jaktai bilet,  
 Akimder akyikatty kaktai bilet.  
 (Molodets!)  
 Akyn akyn bolobu el könülün,  
 Akyikat chyndyk menen eritpegen?  
 Emne degen akshy ölkö eken,  
 Öz altynyn özünö bölüşpögön?  
 Chondorun da alardy tuurap ketti,  
 Öz elinin yrysyn bölüp jegen.  
 Kashaityp Kyrgyzdardyn uluu jolun,  
 Göödöndö namysyn da ölüp jegen.  
 Chondordu kantip chon dep aitalabyz,  
 Bir jolu bul aityshka kelishpegen?  
 (Kol chabuular - 19 sekunda boiuncha)  
 Yr menen atyp turgan tanynardy,  
 Chet ölkölük janagy chette jurgön,  
 Chondun baaryn Atambaev bashchybyzga,  
 Chon akchasyn sunushup baary bardy.  
 Ministr bi, akim bi, ak üiünö,  
 Üch jyl da ailanyshyp dagy bardy.  
 Akyikatyn yrdagan Kyrgyzdardyn,  
 Akylyn baschybyz kachan kabyl aldy?*

(ch. 5, p. 154)

*Istalinden korkpoi yrdagan  
 Bulbulu bolgon Kyrgyzdyn.*

(ch. 5, p. 155)

*Stalinchil akynbyz,  
 Stalinge jakynbyz,  
 Stalin dep jatyrbyz,  
 Stalinge katynbyz.*

- (ch. 5, p. 155-156) *Kamila eje, kairadan sizge kelsem* (Külkülör, kol chabuular),  
*Kaira kaira biz sizge jete albaibyz.*  
*Sekretarsha dep koiot, janynyzda,*  
*Sekelep suluulardan ötö albaibyz.*  
*Ömurkulov Isanyn aituusunda,*  
*Bishkek shaary abdan güldöp jatat.*  
*Körköm kylyp Bishkektei shaarymdy,*  
*Odnorazovyi güldörü bürdöp jatat.* (Kol chabuular)  
*Bir jylda bir joldu бүтүрүшүп,*  
*Biz mintip jol saldyk dep, süilöp jatat.*  
 (Ishkırıktar, kol chabuular)  
*Al emi akyndardy Kyrgyzdardyn,*  
*Aalamga joldu salyp, ündöp jatat.* (Kol chabuular)  
*Kyrgyzstanda jashaibyz, ei Kyrgyzym,*  
*Kyrgyzdardyn öz tilin bil, dep jatat.*  
*Shaardyn ortosundagy jol chyraktar,*  
*Emnege Oruschalap süilöp jatat?*  
 (Barakelde! Ishkırıktar, kol chabuular)  
*Akyndar akyikatty jaktait beken?*  
*Ailasyn biröö baryp tappait beken?*  
*Aalamdy bagyndyrgan tekhnologiyaga,*  
*Ak kalpak Kyrgyz tili batpait beken?*
- (ch. 5, p. 156-157) *Ak kalpak Kyrgyz eldi yrga salyp,*  
*Akyndardyn oozunda paida jüröt.*  
*Ak kostyumdu kiyiship, kychyrashyp,* (Külkülör)  
*Ak üyündün ichinde aila jüröt.*  
*Ak kalpak Kyrgyz eldi unutushkan,*  
*Bir gana akchalailyk paida bilet.*  
*Korgooldun aityshy bolup jatsa,*  
*Madaniyat ministri kaida jüröt?*  
 (Kol chabuular - 20 sekunda boiuncha)  
*Körgöndö uluu eldi kashymdagy,*  
*Köödöngö Kyrgyz degen til berende.*  
 (Asyl eldin balasy ekensin!)  
*Opol todoi Kyrgyz eli kelip tursa,*  
*12 akyn Kyrgyzda tögüp tursa,*  
*Orduna jiberiptir bir kelindi:*  
 (Külkülör, kyikyruular, kol chabuular)



*Karyndash bilbeit ekem atynyzdy,  
 Akyndyk uluu elde, esinizbi?  
 Kubanyp akyndaryn yrdap jatsa,  
 Kuttuktap keliptirsiz kecheebizdi.  
 Akyndar shybady dep ailasy jok,  
 Salam aityp koyunuz shefinizge!  
 (Kyrgyzsdyn chygaan uulu!!!)*

(ch. 5, p. 157)

*Komuzdu möltürö buladym,  
 Koshtodum baike, buradym.  
 Ak bakai obon turganda, oi,  
 Baike Kazakka emne kylapmyn?  
 (Kol chabuular)  
 Baike sözdöriin sheker, sel bolmok,  
 Söölöttüü küngö bel bolbok,  
 Suroomo bir da joop jok,  
 Baike kelbei ele koisom bolmok.  
 (Kol chabuular)*

(ch. 6, p. 178)

*Kyraanym Manas barynda,  
 Kechee Kytaidy turgan korkutup.  
 Kylymdap kelgen tilimdi,  
 Azyr Kirgizin chykty kor tutup.*

(ch. 6, p. 179)

*Kyrgyz biröö bolup törölüp,  
 E kalkym,  
 Kirgiz bolup ölböilü.*

(ch. 6, p. 179)

*Aitpashka kandai argam bar?  
 Ichimde menin arman bar.  
 Azyr ala köödök jandar bar,  
 Alymbek bolup törölüp,  
 Altynchy klass bolgondo,  
 Andrei bolup kalgandar.  
 Jekshen bolup törölüp,  
 Jetinchi klass bolgondo,  
 Jackson bolup kalgandar.*

(ch. 6, p. 180)

*Uluttun barkyn üilötsök,  
 Ubaiyn körüp kalarbyz,  
 Artybyzdagy uul-kyzdyn.  
 Özü ölsö da, kördün go,  
 Sözü ölbödü Chyngyzdyn.  
 Tilindi sakta kalaiyk,  
 Tilindi saktai albasan,  
 Ölgönü oshol Kyrgyzdyn.*

(ch. 6, p. 180)

*Narodnyi dep koyobu?  
 Arak satkan min dükön.  
 Adalynan aram köp,  
 Tamak satkan min dükön.  
 Al emi kitep, sanat-yrlyady,  
 Jamak satkan bir dükön.  
 ...  
 Bir ele dükön bar Kyrgyzda,  
 Kyrgyzdyn uluu sözün saktagan.  
 Anan Kyrgyz til dep bugün men,  
 Emnemiz menen maktanam?*

(ch. 6, p. 181)

*Kyrgyz tilin ar daiym,  
 Kymbattaily, süyölü.  
 Kazak elin bilesin,  
 Tilin kandai baalashat.  
 Özbek elin bilesin,  
 Önörün kandai baalashat.  
 Oshentip jürsök tuugandar,  
 Arubaktan onobuz,  
 Biyik elden bolobuz.*

(ch. 6, p. 187)

*Yr bütsö, meili yr bütsün,  
 Birok syiynar takyr bütpösün.  
 Ar bir jigit moinuna  
 Ölkönün jügün jüktösün.  
 Biyik bolup bashynar, el ichinde  
 Ar daiym uzun bolsun jashynar.  
 Myna bul Kyzyl tuu jerge tüshpösün.*

(ch. 6, p. 189-190)

*Birok, azyrky kündö abaly,  
 Ayabai ele armandai.  
 Baalabai turbuz Aiköldü,  
 Bashty da jerge salgandai.  
 Akkalpak eldin aldynda,  
 Men aйткым bir kelbeit jalgandai.  
 Kumtor jakkan chondorgo,  
 Külchoro jakpai kalgandai.  
 Senterra jakkan chondorgo,  
 Semetei jakpai kalgandai.*

(ch. 6, p. 190)

*Düinönü düngürötiip, Kyrgyz kalkym,  
 Temir tulpar, tanka, zavod kura albaibyz.  
 Aalamdashuu tekhnikanyn zamany eken,  
 Aifon jasap, komputer kyla albaibyz.  
 Aftamat, snaiper jasadak da,  
 Aziyany tan kaltyryp chyga albaibyz.  
 Maktanganga madaniyat, Manasyn bar,  
 Manasty da on besh minut uga albaibyz.  
 Salt boyuncha chapan jaap, at mingizip,  
 Manaschyga könüldü bura albaibyz.  
 Ordoluu Kyrgyz jurту, oilonolu,  
 Orden tagyp, syi-urmat kyla albaibyz.  
 Madaniyat degendi kötörbösök,  
 Ordubuzdan taptakyr jyla albaibyz.  
 Besh manaschy jigiti syilai albai,  
 Men Kyrgyzmyn dep  
 Tösh kakkandan uyalbaibyz.*

(ch. 6, p. 191)

*En chon epos düinödö,  
 Salyshtyrsak dengeeli.  
 Kancha kylym ötkörüp,  
 Körgözgön jok emneni?  
 Internet sotka jok kezde,  
 Manaschy, tökmö yrchylar,  
 Elinin bolgon ermegi.  
 Urpagyna jattat dep,  
 Yuneskoga kattat dep,  
 Bul manaschylardyn emgegi.*

## Appendix 2

### The *aitysh* between Jenijok and Esenaman

Among many old songs and poetry, oral poets were usually asked by local people during informal gatherings to perform the duel of Esenaman<sup>1</sup> and Jenijok<sup>2</sup> in the Soviet era. This poetry duel is one of the most popular pieces in Kyrgyz oral traditions and is promoted as a prime example of the traditional genre of poetry duels among oral poets. Even to this day, when oral poets travel to the regions, local people usually ask the poets to sing this particular poetry duel. The original event took place in Talas province, at a large regional festival organized by a man from the local elite called Eshenkul (1868-1933). Invitations were sent to distant places, from the Kazakh lands in the west to Andijan in the south. Esenaman, Jenijok and the Kazakh poet Maiköt, were invited to perform at the event. When the youngest of the three, Jenijok, who wanted to be the poet of the *toi*, called *jarchy*, arrived a little later than the other two, he sat down at a more favourable seat at the table, or *tör*<sup>3</sup>, when he entered into the *boz üi*. Jenijok was asked to perform first; he started tuning his *komuz* when all of a sudden the middle string of the instrument snapped. Esenaman, an older poet, who had been annoyed by Jenijok's provocative attitude, took advantage of this incident to start his performance first. His lyrics were full of disparaging remarks regarding Jenijok's youthful attitude. The people present knew about Jenijok's biography, the fact that as a teenager he had fallen seriously ill and that the village head, afraid of an ensuing epidemic, had ordered his men to take him away from the village. He was not allowed to return to his village and was relocated to Aksy, a town in Jalalabad region. Thus, Esenaman accused him of being a displaced, homeless person expelled from

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<sup>1</sup> Esenaman, who lived from 1833 to 1913, was a master oral poet from the Talas region. Labelled a court poet of the feudal era, research into his life and works was forbidden until the 1970s (Akmataliev 2012: 219).

<sup>2</sup> Jenijok, who lived from 1860 to 1918, was one of the most famous master oral poets of the pre-revolutionary era, from the Talas region. Condemned as religious and backward, his works were not published until the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Even to this day, among both rural and urban Kyrgyz, where one sits at a table is very strictly defined by tradition. The eldest and most respectable person sits at the head of the table, which is the seat furthest away from the door, *tör*, which he or her faces. To the right hand sits the person with the second highest position, followed by the third person, who sits to the left. Age becomes redundant when it comes to the proper status of the people present: e.g. the host's brother's son sits closer to the head of the table than host's sister's husband, regardless of whether he is older or younger than the latter. Everybody knows where to sit at a table, and it is disrespectful to offer a wrong seat to a guest.

his land who did not know his family's genealogy – a grave insult even today – of not having a proper religious education, etc.

All the accounts describing this duel stress that Esenaman wanted to reduce Jenijok to such a situation that he could not open his mouth anymore (*ekinchi oouz achkys kylat*) (Akmataliev 2012: 315-319). As Esenaman finished his poetry, Jenijok picked up the duel and began his performance by responding to Esenaman's attacks. First, he proved the depth of his religious knowledge:

*First in this world,  
Light, created he.  
Eighteen thousand worlds,  
One, created he.  
Clouds in cold winter,  
A shelter, created he.  
To punish the lazy,  
Destitute, created he.  
To keep the world go by,  
Sun, created he.  
Swapping with the Sun,  
Night, created he.*

*En birinchi düinögö,  
Nur jaratkan emespi.  
On segiz min aalamdy,  
Bir jaratkan emespi.  
Suuk kyshtyn bulutun,  
Sur jaratkan emespi.  
Emgeksizdi enchilep,  
Kur jaratkan emespi.  
Aalam jashap tursun dep,  
Kün jaratkan emespi.  
Almashtyryp kün menen,  
Tün jaratkan emespi.*

Following these rather powerful lines, Jenijok went on to respond to every line of Esenaman's insults and attacks one after another, winning the duel and leaving his opponent speechless. This poetry duel took place at a rather unexpected time for both oral poets and demonstrates a real poetic struggle between two master poets. For these reasons, it is considered to be a prime example of how oral poets can challenge each other while at the same time entering into debates of philosophical depth (Toktogulov 1982; Zakirov 1996; Kebekova et al. 1998).

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**Mustafa Coşkun** is a cultural anthropologist whose research in oral traditions explores cultural politics of heritage and identity in Central Asia. He conducted his doctoral research as a member of the International Max Planck Research School for the Anthropology, Archaeology and History of Eurasia (IMPRS ANARCHIE).

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