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Generic Factors and the Context of Empire in Kirghiz Oral Heroic Poetry from the Mid Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century

Daniel Prior

Epic As Keystone Genre

It is widely recognized that the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia in the nineteenth century brought the peoples of the region face to face not only with foreign, non-Muslim, imperial rulers and colonists, but also with the realization that their traditional way of life was unequal to the rapid onslaught of an alien power. Particularly for settled people in Turkestan, and to some (less-studied) extent for nomads and former nomads in Semirech'e and the steppes, the blow to self-confidence they suffered was all the more vexing for the appearance, after native rule ended, of improvements in some (but certainly not all) aspects their lives. These psychic stresses are evident in different ways in the surviving literature of the time. Scholars focus primarily on three trends in the literature of Central Asian Muslims that can be labeled popular "revolt" and resistance, from the point of view that the Russian advance was a bad thing; progressive "reform" and accommodation, where the Russian presence could be viewed equivocally or even positively;[1] and pessimistic "resignation" and

1 Jo-Ann Gross, "Historical Memory, Cultural Identity, and Change: Mirza ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Sami's Representation of the Russian Conquest of Bukhara," in Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 203–226, here 203. Gross's summaries of the scholarly literature in her endnotes 1 and 2, pp. 221ff., are still largely sufficient for the historical and literary background of the literatures of "revolt" and "reform," with the addition of further references in notes below, and: Adeeb Khalid, "Representations of Russia in Central Asian Jadid Discourse," in Brower and Lazzerini, *Russia's Orient,* pp. 188–202; Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Hisao Komatsu, "From Holy War to Autonomy: Dār al-Islām Imagined by Turkestani Muslim Intellectuals," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* 17/18 (2009), pp. 449–476; Aftandil Erkinov, *The Andijan Uprising of 1898 and Its Leader Dukchi-Ishan Described by Contemporary Poets* (Tokyo: Department of Islamic Area Studies, Center for Evolving Humanities, University of Tokyo, 2009); Tomohiko Uyama, "The Changing Religious Orientation of Qazaq Intellectuals in the Tsarist Period: *Sharīʿa,* Secularism, and Ethics," in Niccolò Pianciola and Paolo Sartori, eds., *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th – Early 20th Centuries)* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), pp. 95–117; Sergei Abashin, "The 'Fierce Fight' at Oshoba: A Microhistory of the Conquest of the Khoqand Khanate," *Central Asian Survey* 33:2 (2014), pp. 215–231. See also Edward Allworth, "The Changing Intellectual and Literary Community; The Focus

introspection, where Russian domination was more a symptom than a cause of generalized malaise.[2] Guy Imart essentially summarized the cultural context of literary works of all these categories from the point of view of Moldo Qılıč (1868–1917), a Kirghiz poet whose written works include a famous example of the third trend, *Qissa-i zilzila* 'Story of the Earthquake'. Imart writes:

> His whole life thus passed in a heavily wounded, bewildered country, where all the traditional (tribal) and rather recently imported (Muslim) values were losing their self-evident, soothing aspects and crumbled while, from all four cardinal points, the mountainous stronghold where his people had so often sought refuge and found shelter, was being invested.[3]

Central Asians created oral and oral-derived narrative poetry dealing directly with the Russian advance into the region. Collections taken down soon after the conquest by contemporary Russian scholars such as "A Kazakh Narrative of the Russian Conquests" featured poems cast in the formulaic diction of panegyrics and praise-poems for heroes, thus refracting the events of the conquest through the prism of familiar genres. In this poem, the contest the heroes waged, though unsuccessful, was honorable and indeed necessary to resist the infidels.[4] A different poem published in the same collection, the "Song of Khudayar Khan," assumes the voice of the last ruler of the Khoqand Khanate, whose third discontinuous reign ended anarchically in 1875, the year

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of Literature," in Edward Allworth, ed., *Central Asia: 130 Years of Russian Dominance* (3rd edition) (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 349–433.

2 On the literature of "resignation," the *zar-zaman* poetic genre, fraught with visions of the vanishing consolations of this world, see also: Thomas G. Winner, *The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1958), pp. 95–98; Hu Zhen-hua and Guy Imart, *A Kirghiz Reader* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1989), pp. 57–78. Kirghiz and other Central Asian scholars utilize several synonyms for *zar-zaman* as genre-terms based on the conventional titles of signal poetic works: cf. Kirghiz *zar zaman* 'time of suffering' (title of a poem by Moldo Qılıč), *tar zaman* 'hard times' (title of a poem by Arstanbek Buylaš uulu [1824?–1878?]), *zamana* 'id.' (title of poems by several bards), *aqır zaman* 'the end times' (title of a poem by Qalığul Bay uulu [ca. 1785–1855]); and see Batma Kebekova, *Arstanbek. Adabii münözdömö* (Bishkek: Ilim, 1994), pp. 27–35; Samar Musaev and Abdyldazhan Akmataliev, eds., *Akylman Kalygul. Yrlar, akyl–nasaattar, darektüü bayandar, ilimii izildöölör* (Bishkek: Sham, 2000), pp. 39–41, 84–86; Sadyk Alakhan, *Besh moldo: Moldo Niiaz, Nurmoldo, Moldo Kylych, Aldash Moldo, Moldo Bagysh* (Bishkek: Aiatta, 2004).

3 Hu and Imart, *A Kirghiz Reader,* p. 76. On Moldo Qılıč Šamırqan uulu, a poet of noble Sarıbağıš lineage, see Moldo Kylych, *Kazaldar,* ed. Omor Sooronov (Bishkek: Turar, 2017); Svetlana Jacquesson, "Un barde kirghiz mal connu Chamïrkan uulu Kïlïtch (1886[*sic*]–1917)," *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* 5/6 (1998), pp. 221–257; Belek Soltonoev, *Kyrgyz tarykhy* (Bishkek: Arkhi, 2003), p. 429; Ėsengul Törökan uulu, *Kyrgyzdyn kyskacha sanzhyrasy,* vol. 1 (Bishkek: Uchkun, 1995), pp. 213–214.

4 Nikolai Veselovskii, ed., *Kirgizskii razskaz o russkikh zavoevaniiakh v Turkestanskom kraie/ Ūrūs lashkarīnīng Turkestāndā tārīkh-i 1269–1272 sanalārda qīlghān futūḥātlārī* (St. Petersburg: Parovaia skoropechatnia P. O. Iablonskago, 1894), especially pp. 1–65 (Russian translation), 3–109 (Turki original).

before Russia abolished the khanate and absorbed its remaining territory. In this poem Khudayar laments his life as a fugitive and yearns for his sons:

qanä Muḥammad Amīn bīrlān
Ūrmān jānīm kelīb tūrsä
wa yā bīr teleġrāf bīrlān
ġarībnī hālīnī sūrsä

But if only Muhammad Amin and
my dear Urman would come,
or inquire in a telegram
how I am doing, poor me![5]

– with no irony attached to his desire to use the communication technology of the outsiders whose conquest had ruined his life.

Literature in tsarist-era Central Asia, particularly literature that reflects the overt concerns of mainly sedentary Muslim intellectuals for the fate of the Dar al-Islam, has received more attention from scholars than the oral genres used by the traditional bards of nomadic peoples.[6] The distinctive oral thought of the nomads should be of interest to intellectual and cultural historians for two main reasons. Certain oral genres, particularly heroic epic poetry and related ones such as the last testaments of and funeral laments for actual warriors,[7] can point to possible modifications of the three-part model of literary tropes described above; also, the tools required to analyze such genres could be useful

5 Veselovskii, *Kirgizskii razskaz/Ūrūs lashkarīnīng … futūḥātlārī,* pp. 65–66 (Russian translation), 110 (Turki original). The English translation is by me, as are translations of passages below unless otherwise noted.

On Khudayar Khan and his sons Urman Bek and Muhammad Amin Bek, see Timur Beisembiev, *Annotated Indices of the Kokand Chronicles* (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2008), pp. 76, 178–179, 388.

6 This is particularly true of western scholarship since 1991. Tomohiko Uyama's chapter, "The Changing Religious Orientation of Qazaq Intellectuals in the Tsarist Period," exemplifies a general focus on literature that is "rich in Islamic motifs" (p. 97).

7 In general see Winner, *The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs,* and the surveys: Leonid Sobolev, ed., *Pesni stepei: Antologiia kazakhskoi literatury* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1940); *Istoriia kazakhskoi literatury,* vols. 1 & 2 (Alma-Ata: Izd-vo Nauka Kazakhskoi SSR, 1968–1979); Z. G. Osmanova, ed., *Istoriia kirgizskoi sovetskoi literatury* (Moscow: Nauka, Glavnaia redaktsiia vostochnoi literatury, 1970), pp. 16–80; Arthur T. Hatto, ed. and trans., *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990). Central Asian publishing and study of formerly suppressed works and genres of verbal art is progressing; of particular relevance to the present essay are numerous volumes in the series *Kyrgyz ėl adabiiaty* (Bishkek); see also Svetlana Jacquesson, "Performance and Poetics in Kyrgyz Memorial Feasts: The Discursive Construction of Identity Categories," in Paolo Sartori, ed., *Explorations in the Social History of Modern Central Asia (19th- Early 20th Century)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 181–206.

more broadly. Where Central Asian oral bards were Muslim intellectuals in the fullest sense of the term, their special expertise in oral knowledge made them distinct.

This paper examines ways in which imperial realities manifested in the flow of verbal art among the Kirghiz (Kyrgyz, Qırġız), a Muslim, Turkic, nomadic and semi-nomadic people of the Tien Shan mountains and surrounding areas of Jeti-suu (Semirech'e) in Russian Turkestan. The Kirghiz were renowned for their love of and expertise in oral poetry. Among the works of their bards, oral heroic epics and related genres (testaments and laments) were recorded starting in the mid nineteenth century – as an indirect result of the expansion of Russian power. Testaments (poetic speeches in which a dying person expresses his wishes and directions to his survivors) and funeral laments over the dead are particularly useful to analyze together with heroic epics. Like that genre, the two shorter forms are existential in their motivations. Heroes' testaments and laments also occur in the texts of the epics. And some independent examples from real life have well-known chiefs and warriors (even patrons of epic poetry) as their subjects. Thus, with epics, they are parts of an interrelated "ecosystem" of heroic genres.

Oral heroic epics, testaments, and laments pose in some ways more subtle interpretive tasks for the cultural and intellectual historian than the literary output of '*ulama*'. One reason for this is simple to state: heroic epic poetry (and by association the testament and lament genres as well, though to a less stringent degree) requires its practitioners – bards, audiences, and patrons together – to invest in the existence of a traditional world of heroes that holds together, out of time, no matter what stresses the epics' performers and hearers may face in real life. By the nature of these genres, heroes have no hope of moral refuge in the dichotomy, popular in the Islamic literature of the time, between the illusory world of men (Kirghiz: *jalġan dünüyö*) and the true and eternal existence, vouchsafed by their faith, that is both beyond time and to be awaited at the end of time (*aqır zaman*). For heroes as such, *this* world is their only chance. The modification "Muslim hero" offers scant analytical help within the thought-world of these genres, beyond a coloring of the concept of "Us."

The subtleties come in when traces of historical experience, even of subjugation within empire, infiltrate the essentially heroic cosmos in indirect ways. In short, in their epics, testaments, and laments, the Kirghiz could be notably reticent and diffuse in thinking about the Russian empire and things Russian.[8] What interests us in analyzing this poetry is the interplay between

8 Outside the set of genres considered in this paper, other Kirghiz oral poetry dealt explicitly with the Russian approach, conquest, and colonial domination; many of the existing texts survive only in later manuscripts. See in the *Kyrgyz ėl adabiiaty* series: Abdyldazhan Akmataliev, K. Kyrbashev, and N. Ömürzakova, eds., *Zholoi. Tailak. Balbai. Osmon. Kyrgyz, Kazak okuiasy. Bugu, Sarbagysh urushu* (vol. 15; Bishkek: Sham, 2002), esp. pp. 291–355; S. Ėgemberdieva and A. Akmataliev, eds, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar* (vol. 19; Bish-

performances and their contexts, the only remaining traces of which are the surviving texts.

Like a crucial animal species that manifests the health of a complex ecosystem, oral heroic epic poetry was the "keystone" genre in the ecosystem of intellectual life before and for a short time after the Russian Empire imposed its rule over the Kirghiz.[9] Of the three genres examined here, epic is the most conservative on the level of content; testaments and laments, being highly topical and much shorter, may show more and quicker responsiveness to current conditions. To make another biological analogy, epics are like the dominant trees in a forest biome, where the smaller testaments and laments appear as understory plants, with shorter timescales of adaptation. In comparison with the modifications observable in the smaller genres from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, in terms of content the epic tradition hardly concerned itself at any point with the Russian imperial context. Structural changes in the epics, however, were profound.

In the discussions that follow I shall offer some potentially useful approaches to analyzing this ecosystem of genres as it relates to the context of the Russian Empire. The body of materials is abundant, amounting to many thousands of poetic lines.[10] Consequently, the selective nature of the exercises

kek: Sham, 2002). Arstanbek Buylaš uulu's poem, *Orus kelet* 'The Russians Come' has been quoted from briefly and commented on (Kebekova, *Arstanbek,* pp. 27–28), but is not, to my knowledge, published in full yet. Other works are preserved in manuscript in the archives of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek. See also two chapters in Aminat Chokobaeva, Cloé Drieu and Alexander Morrison, eds., *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916: A Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020): Jipar Duishembieva, "From Rebels to Refugees: Memorialising the Revolt of 1916 in Oral Poetry" (pp. 289–307), and Daniel Prior, "A Qırghız Verse Narrative of Rebellion and Exile by Musa Chaghatay uulu" (pp. 308–326).

9 The classic evocation of this ecosystem was written by one of the earliest outside observers of the Kirghiz epic tradition, Wilhelm Radloff (= Vasilii V. Radlov), *Proben der Volkslitteratur der nördlichen türkischen Stämme/Obraztsy narodnoi literatury severnykh tiurkskikh plemen,* vol. 5, Dialect der Kara Kirgisen [= Kirghiz] (St. Petersburg: Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften/Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1885), pp. xviii–xix (German)/xvii–xviii (Russian); see also Arthur T. Hatto, ed. and trans., *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan (Kökötöydün ašı): A Kirgiz Epic Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 90–98; Daniel Prior, "Patron, Party, Patrimony: Notes on the Cultural History of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition," Papers on Inner Asia 33 (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 2000); Prior, "Foreword" and "Introduction to a Reading of the Tradition," in Saghïmbay Orozbaq uulu, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan: A Kirghiz Epic Poem in the Manas Tradition,* trans. Daniel Prior (London: Penguin Books, 2022), pp. xv–xxv, 261–313; James Plumtree, "A Telling Tradition: Preliminary Comments on the Epic of Manas, 1856–2018," in S. C. Thomson, ed., *Medieval Stories and Storytelling: Multimedia and Multi-Temporal Perspectives* (Medieval Narratives in Transmission 2) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), pp. 239–301.

10 The heroic epics recorded in the mid-nineteenth century consist of approximately 12,000 lines; epics, testaments, and laments recorded later in the tsarist period have not been fully catalogued or edited, but probably run to a few thousand lines in total. My corpora in this

in this essay could have the unintended and inaccurate effect of magnifying perceived aspects of the influence of the Russian presence on Kirghiz oral traditions. The rarity of cases (impossible to show panoramically in the available space, though I will attempt occasional sketches) is as important to the picture as are their formal particulars, which are the focus of inquiry here.

The historical period under examination extends from the last years of the northern Kirghiz chiefs' (effectively, just) independent power in the mid nineteenth century to the years preceding the Bolshevik revolution – the tsarist period and a bit of its prologue. In the Kirghiz epic tradition this corresponds to the later years of what I term the Heroic Period, and the post-heroic Twilight Age. The start of the Soviet era is roughly contemporaneous with the start of the Classical Period of the epic tradition. In that period, oral tradition was rapidly overwhelmed by new cultural rules, the rehearsal of which is outside the scope of this essay.[11] In prior work I have maintained a specific, structural definition of "heroic" epic poetry, which is of use here primarily for its chronological dimension: heroic plot structures vanish from the textual records around the time of the Russian subjugation of the northern Kirghiz chiefs, hence the transition from the Heroic Period to the Twilight Age in the tradition by 1869.[12]

The analyses below focus in thematic order, not strictly chronological, on texts originating from the northern part of the present-day republic of Kyrgyzstan. This region is where records of the epic tradition survive in greatest extent and continuity, and where the most substantial interactions with related genres such as heroic testaments and laments are witnessed. As is often the case in historical investigations of oral traditions, the sources can be very difficult to date. Even when the manuscript material states or gives evidence of a date, at best it is a date when the item was written down, not necessarily the date of its first composition. Some topical poems from known occasions can be dated by inference to their origination in oral performances. Folkloric materials collected in written form during the Soviet period may reflect poems of longer standing in the tradition. The descriptions of each text below should alert readers familiar with the outlines of Soviet cultural interventions to the complexities, uncertainties, and working assumptions surrounding each text's origin.

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study were exhaustive within the epic genre and selective for testaments and laments, reflecting their greater difficulty of access at this time.

11 I examine factors of tradition and innovation in the early Classical Period in my commentaries in Saghïmbay, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan;* see also Prior, "Patron, Party, Patrimony"; and Svetlana Jacquesson, "On Folklore Archives and Heritage Claims: The Manas Epic in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 64 (2021), pp. 425–454.

12 Daniel Prior, "The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2002); Prior, "Sparks and Embers of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition," *Fabula* 51:1/2 (2010), pp. 23–37.

Form and Context in Oral Performance

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the majority of Kirghiz people experienced their poetry exclusively in oral performances in song. Kirghiz bards were especially renowned among Central Asian oral poets. The copious records of oral heroic poetry, including epics, can be both indispensable and challenging sources on Kirghiz intellectual life under Russian rule. The challenges have less to do with the special problems surrounding interpretation of written-down oral sources, which are well understood and routinely bridged,[13] and relate more to matters of form. The sources tend to say little about the Russian presence, and when they do, it is often in oblique, offhand, and even dismissive ways. Beyond matters of content, however, the inner and outer forms of the sources – plot structures and performance contexts – point to significant changes that occurred in Kirghiz intellectual life under Russian rule.

Because of the strongly existential outlook of oral heroic epics and laments, the forms of poems in these genres often reflect their patronage. Though the Kirghiz epic tradition is one of the best documented in the world, the influences of individual patrons on specific bards in known performances are mostly subjects of inference and reconstruction based on circumstantial evidence. Nevertheless, from the very first written notices about it, Kirghiz heroic poetry has been an outstanding example of the general role of patronage in an oral tradition. This understanding has become the point of departure for fine-grained analyses of specific texts as well as generalizations about the relationships in a three-sided creative community. Performances were events where bards, audiences, and

13 It is beyond the scope of this paper to theorize on the boundaries between oral and written verbal art. The diagnostics of orality used to select the examples analyzed here are simple: the texts are either known to have been taken down from oral performance, or formally reflect a known, traditional oral genre. Assertions of oral or literary character are less important than basic recognition of the traditional nature of the cited poetic genres, the production and enjoyment of which were, if not entirely, then predominantly oral in practice. On textualization of oral epics see Lauri Honko, ed., *Textualization of Oral Epics* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2000), especially the contribution by Karl Reichl, "Silencing the Voice of the Singer: Problems and Strategies in the Editing of Turkic Oral Epics," pp. 103–128; Lauri Honko, "On the Difficulty of Documenting Oral Epics," in Rüdiger Schott and Walther Heissig, eds., *Die heutige Bedeutung oraler Traditionen. Ihre Archivierung, Publikation und Index-Erschliessung* (Opladen: Nordrhein–Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), pp. 185–194; Arthur T. Hatto, "Why Are Oral Heroic Epics So Hard to Destroy? Some Thoughts on Structure," unpublished lecture, Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar, University of London, 14 March 1997. See also Hu and Imart, *A Kirghiz Reader;* Karl Reichl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Daniel Prior, ed. and trans., *The Šabdan Baatır Codex: Epic and the Writing of Northern Kirghiz History* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). On pre-Soviet Kirghiz literature see S. V. Ploskikh, *Repressirovannaia kul'tura Kyrgyzstana. Maloizuchennye stranitsy istorii* (Bishkek: Ilim, 2002); Jipar Duishembieva, "Visions of Community: Literary Culture and Social Change among the Northern Kyrgyz, 1856–1924" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2015).

patrons came together to co-curate and co-create the works of verbal art that were their shared occupation. Though the bard was the creator of the words, he could scarcely function without the attentive involvement and connoisseurship of his audience, nor frame his creation without a sense of "which side his bread was buttered on." General political conditions of the times can be detected in Kirghiz oral heroic epics,[14] and details are apparent in adjacent genres such as epic-like historical narratives.[15] The patronage factor cannot be separated from the poems' orality. Wilhelm Radloff, the first person to publish an account of the workings of the Kirghiz epic tradition, observed and described patrons' and audiences' influences on bards' performances with deep insights[16] that laid the basis of modern oral formulaic theory. He was also a patron of oral heroic epic performances himself, as we shall see below.

Epic bards face new patrons (1856–1862)

The earliest records of Kirghiz oral epic poetry, from the mid nineteenth century, were written down in performances by bards of the Buġu tribe or within the orbit of Buġu chiefs. The performances recorded in these surviving texts were patronized – requested and sponsored – by outsiders. In 1856, the Kazakh Chinggisid and Russian army officer Chokan Valikhanov (1835–1865) wrote down an epic poem from a performance of the bard Nazar Bolot, in the encampment of a Buġu chief east of lake Issyk Kul.[17] In 1862, the German Russian Turcologist Wilhelm Radloff (Vasilii V. Radlov, 1837–1918) collected a number of epic poems from anonymous Buġu bards in the region of the Chu river and lake Issyk Kul.[18]

Within this sizable corpus of heroic epic texts, consisting of about 12,000 poetic lines, specific "observer effects" deriving from bard–patron relations (feedback, in the terminology of folkloristics) are scanty, and evidence of any knowledge the bards had of Russia on the contemporary scene is very attenuated, but for one signal exception to be discussed below. Two theorized instances of feedback are the distinct end-points of the heroic itineraries narrated in two bards' versions of one epic (both of the locations being different from the traditional end-point of the hero's migration). These have been interpreted as the bards' allusive compliments to their patrons, Valikhanov and Radloff.[19]

14 See the subsection, "Fundamentals of the plot," in Prior, "Introduction to a Reading of the Tradition," in Saghïmbay, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan,* pp. 161–167.

15 Prior, *The Šabdan Baatır Codex.*

16 Radloff, *Proben/Obraztsy,* vol. 5, pp. i–xxviii (German)/i–xxvi (Russian), here xiii–xx/xiii–xix.

17 Hatto, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan;* Prior, *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition,* pp. 60–63.

18 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff* (on the dating of the texts and tribal affiliations of the bards, pp. 601–603); Prior, *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition.*

19 Arthur T. Hatto,"Die Marschrouten in der älteren kirgisischen Heldenepik," in Walther

Neither novel location has to do with Russia, or was taken up by other bards in the tradition; the alterations were ephemeral. According to the editor of the Valikhanov manuscript, Arthur Hatto, the bard attempted to oblige Valikhanov by locating the end-point of the hero's route at a legendary place likely to pique the patron's antiquarian interests in the region (indeed the bard remade the entire itinerary, which spans hundreds of miles, shifting it 90 degrees).[20] Such a form of intellectual engagement, initiated by the singer, displays a high level of creative dexterity and poise grounded in accurate geographical knowledge, with little assurance of reward – all in a day's work for a Kirghiz epic bard.

Only one of the mid nineteenth-century epic texts frankly discusses submission to Russia; it is thus of exceptional interest here. This epic recorded by Radloff, a loosely-structured, two-part poem called *Manas's Duel with Er Kökčö; The Marriage, Death and Return to Life of Manas* (2,686 lines)[21] narrates varied exploits of the paramount hero Manas, beginning with a passage in which Manas submits to the Russian tsar and receives his blessing to oppress and plunder any people, Muslim or heathen alike, except for the Russians. The poem begins:

Manas Manas bolγondo,
Manas atka konγondo,
alčayıp atka mingändä,
alıska sapar jürgöndö,
bu dünönü korkutkan,
pändänin barın korkutkan –
ičärinä aš koiγon
Ak-padıša degängä
9 *šuγa Manas baš koiγon.*
9a *Bastırγan jolun kōlabay,*
köp urušup jōlabay,
Ak-padıša eldärinä
ičärinä aš koidu,
Ak-padıša degängä
batır Manas baš koidu,
kesänä būγan bel boldu,
Ak-padıša elinä

Heissig, ed., *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung,* vol. 5 (Asiatische Forschungen 120) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), pp. 331–342; Daniel Prior, "Bok Murun's Itinerary Ridden: Report on an Expedition through Kirghiz Epic Geography," *Central Asiatic Journal* 42:2 (1998), pp. 238–282, here 258–259.

20 Hatto, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan,* pp. 91–92, 130–131.

21 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* text and translation pp. 73–157 and commentary pp. 441–486. On this poem see also Hatto, "The Marriage, Death and Return to Life of Manas: A Kirghiz Epic Poem of the Mid-nineteenth Century," *Turcica,* (part I) 12 (1980), pp. 66–94; (part II) 14 (1982), pp. 7–38.

batır Manas el boldu –
buiryan dāmin jutuptur,
barın Manas tutuptur.
[…]
Čüldürägän Šürsüttü
batır Manas ürküttü!
Buluttun jaidai buradı,
aptap oroi barısın
batır Manas suradı.
Ak sōt kīsä, jeŋ boldu –
Ak-padıša degäni
Manas-minän teŋ boldu!
Ak-kula minip jelgän jok,
Manas Orustu jōlap kelgän jok!
Toburčak ūrün īrdi,
Orustan bölök bu jurttu
Manas keŋešinä kīrdi.
Aq döbö čıyıp taš urdu,
Orustan bölök bu jurtu
Manaska kelip baš urdu.
Šaksı jerdä badam jok:
Manaska kairıp aitar adam jok.
Joloydu joldo taštayan,
kıbırayan jandı baštayan,
Kıtaydın kır murunduu Koŋurbay
kırka saidıŋ bu Manas,
Sarttın jurtun sapırdıŋ,
Kalča jurtun kačırdıŋ,
Kızıl-baš jurtun kıinadıŋ,
Ak-padıšaya barıp sīladıŋ!

When Manas became Manas, when Manas attained name and fame, when he bestraddled his steed and rode on distant journeys, he alarmed this World and terrified men one and all – at a repast set for feasting he submitted to him called 'the White Padishah.[22] He who rides so that no grass grows, who fights so that none can wage war on him, the White Padishah, set a repast for his noble people to feast at, (and here) the warrior Manas submitted to 'the White Padishah'! A sash-of-honour had been wound round Manas's waist, and he had become the White Padishah's subject – he had swallowed the food he had handed down to him – Manas kept all his commands!

[…]

Manas struck terror into the gibbering Manchu, he ruled the 'Land of the Clouds'! – Warrior Manas held sway over all that the sun's rays shine on! When he donned a gleaming corselet it had a sleeve: the one called 'the White Padishah' and Manas were on level terms. Mounting Ak-kula, Manas did not trot, he did not come and make war on the Russians! The war-horse rounded

> up his herd, Manas led those people – apart from Russians! – into his counsels. Going out to the White Hill of Counsel they struck the stone; those people – other than Russians! – came to Manas and banged their heads in submission. On reedy soil there stands no almond-tree – nor is there a man who would gainsay Manas! He had thrown Joloy down on to the path – you, Manas, had lanced sheer-nosed Koŋur-bay of the Kıtay clean through when beginning your faltering life! You churned the Sart people, put the Galcha people to flight, tormented the Kizilbaš people! You went to the White Padishah and made him gifts of honour![23]

Among the mostly typical images of subordination to regnal authority, there is a brief hint of the sort of impression the actual Russian autocrat's power made on the people of Semirech'e: *Bastıγan jolun kōlabay, / köp urušup jōlabay* 'He who rides so that no grass grows, who fights so that none can wage war on him'. Both lines have military significance: in the first, the bard quickly observes that the pre-1862 comings and goings of the Russian army's campaigns (relatively minor as they were, and, of course, waged without the tsar present in person) have worn down the tracks in the region so much that they are bare of their usual coverings of grass. This would have been a telltale sign to nomads, even those who neither fought nor saw any Russians, that they were dealing with a presence far greater than their own forces and the herds they drove on the same paths; that they were dealing with so great a power "that none can wage war on him."[24]

Serial adventures follow in the epic, but not involving the White Padishah (Manas even dies and is resurrected twice). Then in the end, Manas keeps to his oath of allegiance to the tsar, and lives happily:

Adamdı köskö ildi deit,
Ak-padıšanın elinän
bölöktün barın bildi deit.
Manastın Ak-kulası tok boldu!
Ak-padıšanın eli-minän
tüptü buzuk jok boldu!
Urušpai jıγap uktadı,
tınč bolup uktadı!
Kelišpäi jatıp keŋäšti,

22 The Russian tsar.

24 See Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 168–215 (e.g. p. 178 on the scale of transport that the Russian army brought to Semirech'e). A similar observation by a premodern epic poet of note, Wolfram von Eschenbach (d. ca. 1220), characterizes well-trodden roadways by the hardy, low-growing plantains that were the sole herby plants that could survive on them: "he rode over much rough country where plantains were not in evidence" (Arthur T. Hatto, "Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Chase," in Hatto, *Essays on Medieval German and Other Poetry* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], pp. 200–217, here 200–201).

keŋäškändä, ne dešti?
'Manastı köskö il!' dedi.
'Padışam, özüŋ bil!' dedi.
Padıša aittı: 'Men bilsäm,
ačūlanıp kurušpa,
köp jurt-minän urušpa!'
Buyuryan dām jutuptur,
eldin barın tutuptur!
Padışadan bat'alıp,
Manas jakšı boldu deit,
tušpanı tentip ketti deit,
bakt-muratına jetti deit.

[Manas] surveyed all Mankind, he ruled over all except the Ak-padishah's peoples – Manas's Ak-kula ate his fill! Manas did not clash with the White Padishah's people at all! He slept in bliss without contention, he slept tranquilly! When people could not agree, the White Padishah advised him. And when he gave advice, what did they say?

'Look to Manas!', he said.

'My Padishah, you decide!', said the other.

'If I am to decide', replied the Padishah, 'do not get set in your anger, do not come to blows with the many peoples!'

Manas had swallowed the food handed down to him, he held sway over all the peoples. After receiving the Padishah's Blessing, Manas prospered, his enemies wandered away, he attained bliss and the goal of his desires! [The end of the poem.][25]

The change in Manas's circumstances is even more profound than this: whether because of his submission to the White Padishah or due to his serial deaths, or both, by the end of the poem his Forty Companions and close kinsmen have moved away and live apart from him, lords of their own encampments.[26] The tsar can now "divide and rule," we may infer. The epic, however, as may be readily seen, is rather sanguine about the new situation.

Radloff noticed that there was something unusual about the references to the tsar, and suspected his own presence was what caused the bard to make them. He wrote in his preface to the original publication of the text:

> Concerning this episode I draw the reader's attention to the fact that the bard presents Manas throughout the whole song as a friend of the White tsar (the Russian Emperor) and the Russian people. The tsar takes part throughout as an active character. This mention of the tsar was evinced solely by my presence. The bard, thinking that a Russian official would be offended by Manas's conquering the Russians also, took care to make a change that was pleasing to me. Such a circumstance clearly shows how

24 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 156–157. The translation is Hatto's.

25 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 134–137 (lines 1910–1976); 486.

much attention the bard pays to his audience.[27]

The "Russian official" referred to was Radloff himself, but he speaks elliptically: he was not an official, but imagined that this fact was not known to the bard. Arthur Hatto, whose re-edition and translation of the epic text was quoted above, thought it possible that the bard already had practice in narrating the theme of Manas's submission to the tsar before he met Radloff. Indeed both the political context and the well-developed, polished poetics of the passages themselves support Hatto's view; though as he notes, "One may readily concede, however, that the *heavy tone* adopted by the bard was entirely due to Radloff's presence."[28]

The Buġu chiefs who had submitted to the tsar, and who were patrons of bards such as the one who sang the epic above, were knowledgeable and experienced in the politics of imperial hierarchies.[29] Before Russia, Khoqand and the Ch'ing had loomed over them, as well as – closer to the era of the formation of what we know today as the Kirghiz epic tradition, in the eighteenth century – the Zunghar Empire. All these powers had left reflections in the epics. The Sarts of Anjıyan (Andijan: the Khanate of Khoqand) were objects of scorn, but the Qıtays (Chinese) and Qalmaqs (Oirat Mongols, mirroring the Zunghars) fielded the main heroic opponents of the Kirghiz' own epic paragons, the Noġoy (Noghay). The bard whom Radloff recorded was not only speaking to him; he was reimagining the Buġu chiefs' newest political concerns with empire using the genre idiom of epic. But there is no echo of the political situation imagined by this bard in the works of those who came after him. The momentary compliment he paid to Radloff, amounting to about one-half of one percent of the poetic lines in the mid nineteenth-century Kirghiz heroic epic corpus (less, of one includes non-heroic epics in the line count as well), vanished without a trace but for Radloff's pen and paper.

Between 1855 and 1867, the northern Kirghiz chiefs took oaths of submission to Russia, as the empire's military advance pulled them away from their alliances with the Khoqand Khanate and the Ch'ing, and from their mutual raiding with the Senior Horde Kazakhs and each other.[30] Chiefs of the Buġu, among whom Radloff collected this epic in 1862, were among the first

27 Radloff, *Proben/Obraztsy,* vol. 5, pp. xiii–xiv (Russian).

28 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 73, 443 (the quotation is on the latter page, where the italics appear in the original).

29 Daniel Prior, "High Rank and Power among the Northern Kirghiz: Terms and Their Problems, 1845–1864," in Sartori, *Explorations in the Social History*, pp. 137–179; for Sarıbağıš chiefs, see also Tetsu Akiyama, *The Qïrghïz Baatïr and the Russian Empire: A Portrait of a Local Intermediary in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 16–39.

30 Begamaaly Dzhamgerchinov, *Prisoedinenie Kirgizii k Rossii* (Moscow: Izd-vo sotsio-ėkonomicheskoi literatury, 1959); Anvarbek Khasanov, *Vzaimootnosheniia kirgizov s Kokandskim Khanstvom i Rossiei v 50 – 70 godakh XIX veka* (Frunze: Kirgizskoe gos. uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izd-vo, 1961); Prior, "High Rank and Power"; Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia.*

to submit to the tsar, and most were unwaveringly loyal. Thus the content of the epic matches the immediate political context, a correspondence more often theoretically described than historically observed in heroic epic traditions. The political context here essentially led to the end of the Heroic Period of the tradition (as explained below), which may suggest a reason why this type of effect is seldom directly observed in epic traditions.

Thus there is graphic evidence of changes wrought in the text of an epic poem as a result of Russian political domination of the Kirghiz, in a single, ephemeral instance of oral performance before a Russian observer. But this epic is exceptional, and most of the evidence we seek lies apart from explicit references in the texts, in formal features, which range from the structure of a poem to contextual issues even more specific than those between Radloff and his bard. A nearly contemporary example arises not from epic but from a related genre, a chief's testament before his death.

Veiled acceptance of subordination in a chieftain's last testament? (1858)

The Buġu chief Borombay Bekmurat uulu was the first Kirghiz leader to submit to Russian rule, in 1855, after having made a series of petitions over 11 years requesting permission to do so. Thus the Buġu bard and audiences of the epic poem in the example above would likely have perceived parallels between the political status of Manas in the epic and that of Borombay in real life; Borombay himself was a patron of epic poetry. Before his death in 1858, Borombay's formal status as a subject of the tsar was still virtually unique among Kirghiz chiefs.[31] He had also been given the Russian military rank of lieutenant colonel (*podpolkovnik*) and had been presented by the Russian authorities with robes of honor, a sword, and a gold-plated seal; before he swore his oath of submission to the house of Romanov he had also received a red coral rank-button from the Ch'ing.[32]

Kirghiz testaments (*kereez*) are memorable poetic speeches that were recounted after the death of the person whose wishes they voice. Though they were sung in the first person, it is reasonable to suppose that many oral works in the testament genre were reworked by the skilled bards who preserved them in performance tradition, or even composed by them in the first place based on the known wishes of the deceased. Traditional elements of Kirghiz testaments

31 Chokan Valikhanov wrote invaluable information about Borombay based on his meetings with the chief, published in Valikhanov, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh,* ed. A. Margulan et al., 5 vols (Alma-Ata: Kazakhskaia Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1984–1985): "Dnevnik poezdki na Issyk-kul', 1856 g.," vol. 1, pp. 306–357; "Zapiski o kirgizakh," vol. 2, pp. 7–89; and "Ocherki Dzhungarii," vol. 3, pp. 325–356. Borombay's early pro-Russian alignment is evidenced by the fact that he is the first Kirghiz person known to have referred to himself as a *manap,* in the 1840s (see Prior, "High Rank and Power," p. 149).

32 Valikhanov, "Zapiski o kirgizakh," p. 85.

are apparent, but as a genre they cannot be called conservative in the way that heroic epics are. A person giving a last testament may have neither time nor inclination to temper the individual pathos of the situation; nevertheless, there may be calculation in the result.

By becoming the first Russian subject ever to utter the last testament of a loyal Kirghiz chieftain in 1858, Borombay must have been acutely aware that his posterity belonged to a new era and an untested order, for which his own words would serve as model and precedent. In his testament he is remembered to have commanded his people to obey the tsar (*Baš kötörböy moyun sun padıša bergen mizamġa*); not to move away from lake Issyk-Kul (*jurtum, Ïsık-köldön čıqpaġın*); to cultivate wheat (*čıčqanġa egin salıŋar*); and to live in harmony (*ıntımaq boluŋ baarıŋar*).[33]

In addition, Borombay expressed wishes concerning traditional, but in his eyes unseemly, demonstrations of grief that should not be performed at his funeral; the direct consequences of his utterance were also recorded in a poetic rejoinder. Arstanbek Buylaš uulu (1824?–1878?), a bard of the Buġu tribe (though of a division not governed by Borombay), is remembered to have grasped the existential significance of this particularly challenging part of Borombay's testament. An oral-derived biography of the bard gives the story:

> Before he died, Borombay uttered his testament to the people: "Do not let them race horses at my memorial feast; do not raise a funeral mound over my head; do not let my wives put on widows' weeds and scar their faces." His words were seen as a crass departure from the customs and mores of his times, and the people in his inner court were upset. Then Arstanbek picked up his three-stringed lute [*qomuz*], and repeated a few times a sad melody as if singing a lament, and strumming the strings of the lute, he began to sing in a sorrowful voice:
>
> *Oo, Borombay abake,*
> *jurt baščısı sen eleŋ,*
> *jomoġun aytqan men elem.*
> *Qayġısın jegen sen eleŋ,*
> *qazalın aytqan men elem.*
> *At čaptırbas ašıŋa,*
> *qorġon urbas bašıŋa,*
> *betine tırmaq salbastan,*
> *beline arqan čalbastan,*
> *qatını aza kütpögön,*
> *xanzaadaġa küybögön,*
> *Sarbaġıš, Solto, Sayaqtın*
> *kimisinen kem eleŋ?*

33 Bolotbek Dzh. Sadykov, *Funktsii fol'klornykh zhanrov v khudozhestvennom sostave ėposa "Manas" (koshok, kereez, arman, alkysh, kargysh)* (Bishkek: Ilim, 1992), p. 43. The manuscript source quoted there is no. 412(1446) in the archives of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek.

> O Borombay, Father! You are the chief of the people; I am the teller of the tales. You are the afflicted one; I am the singer of lyrics. Unless they race horses at your memorial feast, unless they throw up a funeral mound over your head – unless they take their fingernails to their faces, and strike their bodies with cords, your wives shall not have made their lamentations, your sons shall not have had their grief! Than whom among the Sarıbaġıš, Solto, and Sayaq, are you less?
>
> In saying this, Arstanbek defended Borombay's position as chief of the people, and persuaded him to let them pay their respects in the traditional manner.[34]

The last sentence makes it quite clear that by "upsetting" the members of his inner circle Borombay had crossed a line. What was Borombay's motivation for his ostentatious humility? Certainly the traditional observances were far outside the norms of sharia, and a religious compunction may have been part of the reason why he attempted to prohibit them. But the seriousness with which Borombay considered his status as a vassal of Russia may also have played a part in his thinking.

Breaking new ground in the new political order, Borombay had to guess what it meant in this situation for him to be a Russian subject. By forbidding the performance of old funeral rituals he could demonstrate the profound break he had made with the unruly traditions of the nomads, which were a vexing problem for the Russian authorities. Later Russian and native publications about memorial feasts for rich and influential Kirghiz and Kazakhs in the tsarist period expressed highly critical opinions about the expense and social strain the events caused.[35] Arstanbek's oral biographer, complimenting him (as if "poet saves prince from error"), naturally ignored the possibility that Borombay's wish for a modest funeral did not need to be obeyed. The chief could at least float deferential sentiments in the direction of his new masters, in the tacit hope of being sent off anyway with proper pomp to repose with his forefathers.

The weighty responsibility Borombay faced in giving his testament was all the more resonant due to the coincidence that a heroic testament features prominently in an epic poem, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan*, which was in circulation among the Buġu at the time. Our earliest surviving version of this epic was the one performed by Nazar Bolot in 1856 and written down by Chokan Valikhanov. Coincidentally, the recording session took place just a short time after the latter met Borombay for the first time, and within the chief's

34 Kebekova, *Arstanbek,* pp. 9–10. The poetic source quoted by Kebekova is different from another manuscript that contains the testament.

35 See, for example, articles in the newspaper *Dālā walāyātīnīng gazītī/Kirgizskaia stepnaia gazeta,* reprinted in the collection *Dala ualaiatynyŋ gazetĭ /Kirgizskaia stepnaia gazeta* (Almaty: Ghylym, 1994): "As (pominki) v Karkaralinskom uezde" (pp. 330–332, originally published 1894), and A. Bukeikhanov, "O kirgizskikh pominkakh" (pp. 711–715, originally published 1900). Both articles concern Kazakh feasts.

extended encampments.[36] The Russian military expedition of which Valikhanov was a member was present in Buġu territory in order to make contact "on the ground" with Borombay, who only the previous year had made his oath of submission.

The plot of *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan* in Nazar Bolot's telling hinges initially on what Kökötöy's survivors decide to do about the instructions he gives in his last testament. These concern the continued well-being of his people, his polity, his companions-in-arms, and his wealth. The overtly political and economic nature of the testament[37] speaks to its existential importance, and could have been a model for Borombay. Like the interaction we saw around Borombay's testament, Kökötöy's survivors treat the deceased khan's behests according to their own wishes, although this text provides no explicit parallel with the theme of flouting the dying man's prohibitions per se. Such a theme is found elsewhere in the epic tradition, however.

The criticisms leveled at Kirghiz and Kazakhs who held extravagant and potentially fractious memorial feasts in the tsarist era seem to have influenced the import of Kökötöy's testament in the composition of a later epic bard. Sağımbay Orozbaq uulu (ca. 1867–1930, of the Sayaq tribe but frequently patronized by Sarıbağıš and Solto chiefs) composed his classic, unified version of the *Manas* epic cycle in the early years of Bolshevik rule in Semirech'e. In his *Kökötöy* epic, which was recorded in performance in 1925, the khan's deathbed testament is contradictory: for long stretches Kökötöy says he does not want an extravagant memorial feast, a lot of guests, or traditional games to accompany the solemnities; in other long stretches of the same speech, he completely contradicts himself and says he does want those things.[38] Sağımbay crafted the contradictions in order to dramatize the later controversy between Kökötöy's surviving regent and his orphan son, Boqmurun. This young hero's decision to take upon himself the responsibility for giving the memorial feast constitutes the first step in his heroic enterprise. Part of Boqmurun's rationale for holding a large, extravagant feast is a second guess: when his dying father said "Don't," he must have been signaling "Do." In the following passage, the young hero addresses the regent:

Atakem aytqan kereezin
qılbay qoyor kem belem?

36 Prior, *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition,* pp. 60–63.

37 Hatto, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan,* pp. 2–7 (lines 1–161). The other mid-nineteenth century text of the *Kökötöy* epic does not contain the dying khan's testament ("Bok-Murun," in Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 159–225).

38 *Manas. Kyrgyz ėlinin baatyrdyk ėposu,* Sagymbai Orozbak uulunun varianty boiuncha akademiialyk basylysh, ed. S. Musaev et al., vol. 8/9 (Bishkek: Turar, 2014), pp. 14–30 (lines 227–1437). On this testament in relation to the earlier epic tradition, specifically the passage noted above in Hatto, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan,* see now Saghïmbay, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan* for an English translation (pp. 6–25) as well as the section by Prior, "Introduction to a Reading of the Tradition," especially pp. 290–291.

Qılba – dep, – aytıp salıptır,
qıyamat ketip qalıptır.
Qıyamat ketken özü eken,
Qıl – dep, aytqan sözü eken!
Aqıret ketken özü eken,
artındaġı qalġanġa
aš ber degen sözü eken!
Aš bermek bizge qarız eken,
atamdın aytqan arzı eken,
uruġu Uġuz balası
aqır bir nusqa čıġarıp,
aš berdirmek dartı eken.

"Won't I be even less of a person if I fail to put on the memorial feast my father requested in his last testament? He made his pronouncement, it seems, 'Don't do this,' but then he departed for the next world. Don't you see, he was about to pass on to the next world; 'Do it' is what he was saying! Don't you see, he as about to depart to the hereafter; what he was saying to his survivors was 'Give my memorial feast!' We owe my father a memorial feast. It was apparently just what he was requesting. As a descendant of Ughuz he was at pains to have a memorial feast put on that would stand out as a lasting example".[39]

Boqmurun's rhetorical task in this passage from epic, to give a certain spin to the words of his dead father's testament, differs from Arstanbek's above where he flatly disputed the testament of Borombay, an actual chief. Nevertheless the two discourses around dying men's last testaments point to existential concerns that seem to have become exacerbated by the imposition of Russian rule over the Kirghiz. Another genre, funeral laments, which unlike testaments are focused on the dead hero's past rather than the future, sometimes approach the nature of narratives. Like testaments, their smaller scale and topical focus reveal malleable content in reflection of contemporary conditions.

Challenging views on Russia in heroic lament and epic (1869)

Jantay Qarabek uulu (ca. 1795–1867) was an important chief of the Tınay division of the Sarıbağıš tribe. Where Borombay the Buġu, whose home pastures were near the Chinese border, had held a rank conferred by the Ch'ing before submitting to the tsar, Jantay the Sarıbağıš, further west and closer to political influence from the Ferghana valley, held the Khoqandian rank of *dādkh^{w}āh* before he made peace with Russia. Jantay was a prominent war leader and a skilled statesman in the turbulent, multipolar political relations the Kirghiz faced in the mid nineteenth century. In the mutual hostilities between the Buġu and the Sarıbağıš in the 1850s, Jantay had not been very active. Unlike

39 *Manas. Kyrgyz ėlinin baatyrdyk ėposu,* vol. 8/9, p. 34. The translation is found in Saghïmbay (trans. Prior), *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan,* p. 30.

Borombay, who petitioned Russia for several years to be permitted to give his oath of submission, Jantay was forced into his accommodation with the expanding Russian empire by the tide of emergent conflicts, in which he had taken Khoqand's side in battle as recently as 1862. Sometime between then and 1864 he is considered to have submitted to the tsar; the immediate motivation was to ask for Russian military protection in an inter-tribal conflict, though the details are obscure. Indeed it has been proposed that Jantay never formally submitted to the tsar, as it seems no document has been adduced to attest to the oath.[40] Nevertheless the Russian authorities bestowed high honors on him: the rank of lieutenant colonel (*podpolkovnik*), a gold medal, and commendations for his service in fighting the Kazakh enemy of Russian expansion in the 1840s, Sultan Kenesarı, and for other good offices in peacetime.[41]

Thus Jantay had complicated relationships with Russia and other neighbors. When he died in 1867, he was eulogized in a funerary lament by an anonymous Kirghiz bard. This work, consisting of 132 lines, was taken down by Wilhelm Radloff in 1869, in the valley of the river Chu, where Jantay's headquarters had been located (it is not known whether the performer was the lament's original author). By their nature, heroic laments, like testaments, are more reflective of contemporary situations than the more conservative genre of epic. The bard deals in detail with the complicated political stage on which Jantay excelled:

Kan Jantaını bis aissak,
ne jerindä čalası?
alakan jaisa batası.
Kan Karabek atası
tömöngüsü Kokonγo
öküm aitıp jatčı ekän.
Kan Jantaının barında
Oruska elči kirči ekän,
oi akıldı bilči ekän;
Kan Jantaının barında

40 The suggestion that Jantay's submission remained informal was made to me in conversation in 2008 by Jaŋıl Abdıldabek qızı (1947–2021), Jantay's great-great-granddaughter and biographer of his son Šabdan Baatır. The statement contradicts one made by Abdıldabek qızı in print in 1992 to the effect that Jantay signed a document of submission, but no archival address is given in that publication, and the wording there betrays the Soviet-era trope of "voluntary incorporation within Russia" in connection with Jantay's actions (in Russian, *dobrovol'noe vkhozhdenie v sostav Rossii;* in Abdıldabek qızı's Kirghiz publication, *Rossiyanın quramına ėrkin qošuluusu*), so there may be a lack of candor reflecting the requirements of late Soviet-era publishing (Zhaŋyl Abdyldabek kyzy, "Babam Shabdan zhönündö," in Keŋesh Zhusupov and Nuraly Kaparov, eds., *Shabdan Baatyr* (Bishkek: Uchkun, 1992), pp. 15–29, here 19). On Jantay's death date see Dzh. Abdyldabek kyzy, ed., *Shabdan Baatyr: Ėpokha i lichnost'. Dokumenty i materialy* (Bishkek: Sham, 1999), p. 38.

41 Prior, *The Šabdan Baatır Codex*, pp. 39–43, 64–66.

Kalmakka elči kirči ekän –
bıldıraγan Kalmaktın
tilin juda bilči ekän.
Aitūlū Kan Jantaidın
mingän atı bos ekän.
Kalmaktın kanı Koŋtoiju,
batır Koŋtoiju-minän
Karabek ökō dos ekän.
Karanın kanı Kan Jantai
beiškä ösü kirbäibi?
Emdigilär bilbäsä,
ilgärki ölgön bilbäibi?
Beglärbägi tušunda
belsänip čıkkan Kan Jantai,
Kušbeginin tušunda
kutura čıkkan Kan Jantai:
ondo bīlär kor elä,
Kan Jantai özü zor elä.

> When we sing of Khan Jantay where will there be any shortcomings? When he spread the palms of his hands it was his blessing. His father Khan Karabek's writ used to run all the way down to Kokand. In Khan Jantay's time, envoys went in to the Russians, he was a man of wise perceptions; in Khan Jantay's time, envoys went in to the Kalmak, he was well-versed in their jabbering tongue. The horse ridden by the famous Khan Jantay was a (light) grey. Karabek was friends with Koŋtoiju, Khan of the Kalmak, the warrior Koŋtoiju. Will not Khan Jantay, khan of a teeming people, himself enter Paradise? If those living now do not know, will not they know who died in byegone days? Girding himself for battle, Khan Jantay took the field against the Beglerbegi; his battle-frenzy mounting, Khan Jantay took the field against the Kushbegi.[42] Then those *biy*s were humbled, while Khan Jantay himself proved the mightier.[43]

In this complimentary résumé of Jantay's life, "In Khan Jantay's time, envoys went in to the Russians" (lines 18–19) is the only mention of one of his most important political relationships. There are a number of reasons why the Russian tsar would have been treated in such an off-hand manner in the eulogy of a Kirghiz chieftain who was a friend and effectively a vassal. One was that

42 Khoqandian officers: *Bēklārbēgī,* title of the governor of Tashkent in the 1830s; *Qūshbēgī,* the second highest military rank. Beisembiev, *Annotated Indices of the Kokand Chronicles,* pp. 739, 805.

43 Radoff, *Proben/Obraztsy,* vol. 5, pp. 590–594; re-edited with commentary by A. T. Hatto (whose translation is quoted here), "Jantay: A Kirghiz Lament for a Chieftain, Dated 1867–1869," in Klaus Sagaster and Michael Weiers, eds., *Documenta Barbarorum. Festschrift für Walther Heissig zum 70. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), pp. 186–195 (here 186-187).

the genre required it. Jantay was different things to different people in the complex new imperial space of Russian Turkestan, but one thing he was not, within the thought-world of a Kirghiz heroic funerary lament, was a servant of the tsar (see below, however, on the poem's handling of Jantay's deference to Khoqand). The lament's broad chronological frame and the panegyric tone of the genre also served to de-emphasize the subordinate relationship with Russia that became salient for Jantay only in his last years. It is telling that this passage rates Jantay's battle prowess and statesmanship in comparison with other powers, but there is no comparison with Russians or the tsar; the silence announces that this was too sensitive a topic to treat in the context.

Several other passages of the lament provide more illumination of its political and religious context; these are given below according to Hatto's translations but without quotations from the original Kirghiz, in order to save space.

> (lines 45–48): "His religion went for himself, his prosperity was left to his son; his faith went for himself, his counsel was left to his son."

This is the sole allusion to the Islamic duties Jantay upheld for his soul's welfare in the afterlife. It must be recognized that the occasion of this lament's composition and performance would have been not the sharia funeral and burial rituals, but the grand memorial feast and games put on by Jantay's heirs, traditionally on the anniversary of decease. Sharia conventions were less prominent parts of the proceedings on those occasions.

> (lines 65–66) "Khan Jantay's manly prowess was to the fore of the Sarıbagıš and the Solto!"; (72–79) "Were you not a red-tailed dromedary? – Was there your like among the Kirghiz? Were you not a black-tailed dromedary? Was there your like among the Kazakh? Your saddle-cloth was of black velvet, your manhood raced ahead of the Kazakh: your saddle-cloth was of red velvet, your manhood raced ahead of the Kirghiz!"[44]

Here are the only mentions in the poem of the ethnonyms Kirghiz and Kazakh, and of Kirghiz tribal groupings.

> (lines 92–103) "When he visited begs he was distinguished, a rug was spread … he was well-known to the sons of begs, illustrious Jantay in his Tatar boots as he sat in the presence of the begs had his sash filled with gold; as he sat in the presence of the Khan he had his cap filled with gold; turning his neck so like the *kazgaldak* duck's, he took his portion of food from the Khan; turning his neck so like the little bustard's, he took his portion of food from the begs."[45]

These lines describe the generosity of begs and the khan (of Khoqand) toward Jantay. In light of the food motif seen above in the epic poem *Manas's*

44 The word that Hatto translates as "dromedary," *nar,* more accurately means a Bactrian–dromedary camel hybrid. These beasts are much prized for being larger, stronger, and hardier than either pure breed.

45 I have changed Hatto's translation of this passage slightly.

Duel with Er Kökčö; The Marriage, Death and Return to Life of Manas, it is clear that in taking food from the khan's and the begs' dishes, Jantay was enacting his subordination to them. The Kirghiz phrases here are *kandan jemin airγan … bektän jemin airγan* (lines 101, 103), a lexically different but semantically related construction to the one in the epic in the preceding section, where Manas 'swallowed the food handed down to him' from the White Padishah (*buirγan dāmin jutuptur*, line 18; *Buyurγan dām jutuptur*, line 2681).

> (lines 105–106): "when Khan Jantay was asked to speak, khans shook their heads in wonder"; (115–125): "Firmly gripping his dazzling steel, Shir-Ali-khan inspected him. – And what did the Khan say when he had done so? 'Bravo! What a man !' is what he said. Pronounced the equal of fortress-begs, Karabeg's son Khan Jantay went side by side with rulers. He played his part in his people's struggles: enemies who came to quarrel he reduced to impotence, he got his people out of legal wrangles."

The relative statuses of Jantay and Shīr ʿAlī Khan of Khoqand (r. 1842–1844),[46] the only sovereign mentioned in the lament, are not strongly differentiated, though for the khan to be in a position to inspect Jantay implies a higher status at least informally. There is nothing in these lines about submission to the sovereign such as was seen above. We know little of what Jantay's actual relationship with Khoqand meant in practice beyond his holding the rank of *dādkh^{w}āh.* Jantay's relative status with other "khans" (presumably those who reigned in Khoqand at other times) is treated by the bard in a similarly sketchy manner here. The *uluktar* with whom he "went side by side" (line 121) may not be what Hatto translates as "rulers"; the word also means "governor, commander, chief, prince, lord" (perhaps the reference was to Khoqandian *hakim*s).

Russian observers viewed Sarıbaġıš chiefs in the 1850s and 1860s as disruptive, particularly in comparison with the Buġu led by Borombay and his successors, who were involved in a bloody feud with certain divisions of the Sarıbaġıš. The lament for Jantay certainly confirms an assertive self-image of a Sarıbaġıš chief. (I am not aware of the existence of texts of laments for Borombay the Buġu, whose reputation with the Russians was more "peaceable," with which to compare the lament for Jantay.)

An example of heroic poetry with an even more challenging outlook is a brief epic poem of 164 lines, *The Birth of Manas*, that Radloff collected among the Sarıbaġıš in the Chu valley in 1869.[47] The poem portrays the infant Manas

46 On Shīr ʿAlī Khan, see Scott C. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 1709–1876: Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), pp. 161–165.

47 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 3–11 (on the attribution to a Sarıbaġıš setting and the date of 1869, see p. 399). Radloff concluded that the poem was made up by the bard on the spot in response to a question from Radloff (*Proben/Obraztsy,* vol. 5, p. xiii). On this poem see also Hatto, "The Birth of Manas: A Confrontation of Two Branches of Heroic Epic Poetry in Kirgiz," *Asia Major* n.s. 14:2 (1969), pp. 217–241.

growing into the role of *ghāzī* and making an elaborate boast from the cradle that he will sack and subjugate the Noyġut (a Kirghiz tribe), the Khoqandians, the Sarts, the Kazakhs, and the Kirghiz (no matter, for a Kirghiz epic *ghāzī* of the mid nineteenth century, that these were all Muslims).[48] The Russians are not on the list; nor do the heathens to the east appear until the end, when Manas proposes to "march on Bejin," then drives groups of Chinese of Kashgharia eastward.[49] The bard emphasizes the young hero's *ghāzī* nature when he has him boast, "I shall open up the path of the Muslim and scatter the wealth of the Infidel. I shall force the Infidel back, shall impel the Muslim to victory!"[50] But none of this is directed at Russia. By 1869 it was politically imprudent for a Kirghiz bard to voice opposition to Russia in the hearing of a person like Radloff. Yet this Sarıbağıš bard maintained a certain aloofness toward Russia. Hatto noted a line near the opening where the bard situated Manas's father's encampment: "at the head of Jeti-tör, [Jakıp] had his being at the mouth of the Almatı-gorge above Šuŋkar-uya," and theorized, "It might […] have been a defiant gesture on the part of the Kirghiz bard that he perched Jakıp's aul in an eyrie (cf. v. 7 *Čuŋkar-uya*) in the mountains from where he could look down on Vernoe (Alma-Ata), which had been given the status of a Russian town only two years before."[51] Though the short epic *The Birth of Manas* was recorded after Jantay died, it is still redolent with political conceits of the kind we can see in Jantay's lament, which appear to have a Sarıbağıš coloring. Radloff recorded the two poems on the same field trip in roughly the same location. "Observer effects" related in part to his status as a Russian person in newly pacified Kirghiz territory may have affected the form and content of the two poems. Close analysis of the diction in the two texts could help to determine if their creators were actually one and the same singer.

The lament for Jantay forms one part of a set of sources on funeral observances for the chief and his son, the famous Šabdan Baatır. The rest of the set comprises laments for Šabdan.

Toward acceptance of reality in post-heroic laments (1912)

Šabdan Jantay uulu (ca. 1839–1912) was the most influential Kirghiz tribal

48 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 6–7 (lines 28–38).

49 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 10–11 (lines 148, 161–164). My translation of line 148, "march on Bejin," differs from Hatto's. Bejin in Kirghiz epic geography in the mid nineteenth century was a vaguely-defined Chinese realm in close proximity to Kirghiz territory.

50 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 8–9 (lines 68–72).

51 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 6–7 (lines 7–9); see also p. 3. *Čuŋkar-uya,* for the more regular form *Šuŋkar-uya,* means literally 'gyrfalcon nest', and was interpreted by Hatto as a toponym. This is plausible, but the place has not been identified in the precise neighborhood where the bard envisioned it, and the interpretation of the term as a figurative expression for a camp at a great height also seems possible.

leader of the colonial period. As a young *baatır* or war leader he participated in numerous actions in the turbulent years preceding the pacification of the northern Kirghiz, then joined in his father Jantay's decision to live at peace with Russia. His military service in the reduction of the Khoqand Khanate earned him honors.

The tsarist colonial space provided security and a power structure that Kirghiz chiefs could use to their advantage. Šabdan was the most prominent beneficiary of the system of indirect social influence wielded by the *manap* estate, a stratum of chiefs originally confirmed by the Russian authorities who managed to hold on to informal power after the military government weakened and eliminated their official positions.[52] Šabdan had witnessed great changes in Kirghiz society by the time he died in April 1912 at the age of 72. His heirs, however, were intent on giving the traditional great memorial feast and games; these were held in October of that year at Šabdan's home pasture on the Little Kemin river near the Chu river and lake Issyk Kul. It was the last memorial feast of grandiose scale held among the Kirghiz. The event has been described and analyzed in recent literature.[53]

Šabdan was lamented by both male and female singers. At least three laments have been preserved. The epic bard Sağımbay Orozbaq uulu, a sought-after herald and lamenter at memorial feasts, sang a long lament at Šabdan's feast from the top of a specially-constructed tower with trumpet accompaniment, a brief excerpt of which was later written down.[54] Another lament was composed in writing in 1912 by Ïsaq Šaybekov (1880–1958). He claimed he created the text as a prompt for a female member of Šabdan's family to use for her performance at the memorial feast, and that he did this "to fulfill an obligation," after inquiring about Šabdan's background from old men who had grown up with him.[55] (The information from Ïsaq about the circumstances of his composition is given at the end in a note dated 1935.[56] The date of the note suggests that Ïsaq was attempting to distance himself from the appearance

52 Akiyama, *The Qïrghïz Baatïr and the Russian Empire;* Prior, *The Šabdan Baatır Codex;* Prior, "High Rank and Power."

53 See now the detailed sociopolitical analysis of Šabdan's memorial feast (*aš*) by Akiyama, *The Qïrghïz Baatïr and the Russian Empire,* pp. 104–117; and Daniel Prior, ed. and trans., *The Semetey of Kenje Kara: A Kirghiz Epic Performance on Phonograph* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2006), pp. 139–141.

54 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* pp. 231–234 (116 lines); 397. Shorter versions of this and the next lament are also printed in Zhusupov and Kaparov, *Shabdan Baatyr,* pp. 116–122.

55 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* pp. 234–249 (approximately 690 lines); 398. Besides the printed edition, the scanned manuscript in Arabic script with a typed Cyrillic transcript (shelf no. 295[514] in the manuscript archives of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic) is available in electronic form: https://manuscript.bizdin.kg/static/media/pdf/web-295-Shabdan-koshogu-Y-Shaibekov.pdf, viewed 7 January 2022.

56 Pp. 34–35 of the typescript contained in no. 295(514).

of having known about the life of this famous member of an exploiting class, and of having had an independent interest in composing a poem praising him.)

Both laments mention Šabdan's submission to the tsar.[57] Also, both are notably abundant with ethnic names for peoples, tribes, and clans, and similar uses of place names to indicate the residence areas of different populations. Thus Sağımbay sang:

Jediger menen Munduzdan,
Jetimiš uruu Qırġızdan,
Qutču menen Saruudan,
qurama jurttun baarınan,
Sayaq menen Buġudan,
zar ıyladı üč duban;
sanaasınan čıġarbas,
san Sarbağıš öz tuuġan.

From the Jediger and the Munduz, from the seventy Qırġız tribes, from the Qutču and the Saruu, from the whole motley nation – from the Sayaq and the Buġu – three districts were sobbing; countless numbers of his own relatives the Sarıbağıš were unable to overcome their grief.[58]

The profusion of terms for ethnic groups and their places of residence, and the appearance of terminology like *duban* (generally absent from the mid nineteenth-century texts, but which in the tsarist era meant an uyezd, district, or region) is vivid evidence of the adoption by this Kirghiz singer and his listening public of the social taxonomy with its myriad markers favored by imperial bureaucrats and ethnographers.

Ïsaq's lament, the surviving text of which is longer than the surviving fragment of Sağımbay's, highlights Šabdan's religious piety and recounts his having completed the haj. Ïsaq also gives a rather full account of Šabdan's military and political career, in a vein comparable to the praise of his father Jantay's deeds and influence found in the heroic lament from 1869. Touches of diction seem to relate Ïsaq's lament to the Manas epics mentioned earlier. Like *The Birth of Manas*, where the hero "gobbled" surrounding peoples, for Šabdan the Kazakhs and Kirghiz "were all fodder for you." The motif of sharing food as a sign of unequal parts in a relationship, as between Manas and the White Padishah above, is echoed, in altered form: "You shared of your food with those who accompanied you" (*Qazaq, Qırġız oŋu, sol/ baarı bolġon sizge jem./ Birge jürgön adamġa/ bölüp berdiŋ jemiŋden*[59]).

Šabdan's exploits on numerous campaigns are celebrated in the lament, including a plundering raid on Qalmaqs in Chinese territory in his youth.[60] The

57 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* pp. 233, 236, 240.
58 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* p. 233.
59 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* p. 236.
60 Ėgemberdieva and Akmataliev, *Tarykhyi yrlar, koshoktor zhana okuialar,* p. 236.

raid was also the subject of a full-length, epic-like historical poem dedicated to Šabdan just a couple of years before he died. This is one of two epic-like historical poems comprising the core of a unique manuscript, which I have called the Šabdan Baatır Codex.[61] The work, by Musa Čağatay uulu, consciously revives the youthful raiding ethos of its patron, Šabdan, in a composition finished when he was an old man, about 1909 or 1910. The raiders had been punished by the Russian military government in Semirech'e for their lawless actions, yet that fact goes unmentioned. Nostalgia for the daring exploits of their youth seems to have encouraged older Kirghiz to keep such memories alive, both in the longer narrative form and in the lament at Šabdan's memorial feast.

As was customary, women performed laments at Šabdan's memorial feast. Typically these lamenters would be well-known, even professional, mourners. Wives and daughters of the deceased also uttered laments.[62] In the epic tradition, after Manas dies, his widow Qanıkey utters her own lament over his death.[63] In real life there were coaches and ghostwriters for women or girls who needed assistance. Women's laments dealt less with a dead man's martial life and more with his good deeds and qualities in peacetime, and the pain of his loved ones over their loss. Ïsaq's poem sounds more like a men's lament or *qošoq*, so his claim that he composed it for a woman to perform may have been a dissimulation to deflect Bolshevik suspicion (in 1935) that he had publicly sung praises of an aristocrat, one who had been both a pious Muslim and a belligerent presser of "feudal" tribal quarrels.

The text of a lament for Šabdan by an anonymous woman at the memorial feast was published in Russian translation by S. Ie. Dmitriev, who had been present:

> "O, our father! – You excelled from your childhood in unusual generosity, kindness and bravery. – You took part in numerous campaigns, you took part in punishing peoples who were hostile to us, and you assisted in subduing them. The authorities[64] acknowledged your services and awarded you multicolored robes, medals, and sabers. – You were known everywhere: there was not a single Muslim in our land who would not have known your name. Your reputation echoed like thunder all the way to Bukhara, India, Tyumen', and the Crimea. – You were favored with the special honor of attending the coronation of the Sovereign. You traveled to many cities and made acquaintances of many highly-placed persons. Attention was paid you, and you were granted the Czar's favors and awarded a [high] rank. When you returned, both the Governor-General in Tashkent and the Military Governor in Vernyi, taking an interest in the time of your arrival, were notified by telegraph and

61 See Prior, *The Šabdan Baatır Codex,* pp. 104–145.

62 Sadykov, *Funktsii fol'klornykh zhanrov,* p. 13.

63 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 306–307 (lines 50–66); *Manas. Kyrgyz ėlinin baatyrdyk ėposu,* vol. 8/9, pp. 625–627 (lines 45927–46152). (The same volume contains Sağımbay's funeral eulogy in his own voice, *Joldoš Leninge ılayıq* 'On Comrade Lenin', pp. 635–640 [311 lines], dated 25 January 1924, four days after the chairman's death).

64 The Russian authorities are meant.

> waited for you impatiently. […]
> "And now if the authorities come, with what sorrow will the officials recollect you, as they will be unable either to meet them or even to utter a word to them! And if the Military Governor comes, *who* besides you will go out to meet him, speak a kind greeting, and candidly explain to him all the people's needs? Out of fear of the Military Governor the volost and *aul* [elders] will be silent and merely bow. […]
>
> "The exceptional consideration you enjoyed from the authorities has continued even after your death. The Governor made an order, and troops came to your funeral: they gave you military honors with a volley from their arms. At your funeral not only Kirghiz and Kazakhs, but the majority of Russians as well, headed by the district police superintendent, shed sincere tears. – O, alas, was there ever another time when a Russian wept for a Kirghiz?!"[65]

Both the father, Jantay, and the son, Šabdan, were lamented after their deaths in traditionally extemporized oral poems. Jantay was remembered in a robust heroic lament which, as perhaps befitted a leader who had tended serial political and military agendas throughout his long life, made no mention of his submission to the Russian tsar. The lament emphasized conflicts, thus showing Jantay, as a hero, glorified in terms of the enemies he fought. Šabdan's laments, especially those composed by men, talk up his war experiences; the woman's lament makes more of his submissiveness to the tsar and his excellent reputation.

Dmitriev commented: "All the [laments at Šabdan's memorial feast] amounted to [...] how he fought alongside the greatest Russian generals, how he was honored with a summons to the coronation of the Sovereign, how he obtained distinctions—ranks and orders, how he built a mosque at Great Kebin, how he cared for the well-being of his people, etc."[66] Jantay's and Šabdan's lamenters wisely suppressed references to old conflicts the warriors had had with their future Russian masters. Šabdan's laments, especially the one by the female mourner, show that the existential concerns of a Kirghiz chief and his survivors had vastly changed between 1869 and 1912; laments were one of the more flexible genres in this ecosystem.

Broad Trends in Ethnic Concepts

Empires in the broad sense are sometimes implicated as catalysts in the development of heroic epic traditions. There is no single formula, and possible historical scenarios can hinge on the approach, or the presence, or the disappearance of an empire. Germanic and Brittonic heroic poetry appeared

65 S. Ie. Dmitriev, "Baiga u karakirgizov po sluchaiu smerti manapa Shabdana Dzhantaeva v Pishpekskom uiezdie," *Izviestiia Imperatorskago Russkago geograficheskago obshchestva* 48:6–10 (1912): 529–544 (offprint 1914); the translated excerpts are from Prior, *The* Semetey *of Kenje Kara,* pp. 139–140.

66 Dmitriev, "Baiga u karakirgizov," p. 535.

amid chiefly competitions in the vacuum of power after the collapse of Roman rule in northwest Europe.[67] But where the disappearance of an empire may be associated with the efflorescence of a tradition of heroic poetry, the expansion and imposition of imperium have also been connected with the decadence, folklorization, and nationalization of such traditions. The latter case, in succinct terms, is the type of development seen in the Kirghiz epic tradition in the mid nineteenth to the twentieth century.[68] But the question is unresolved how the processes that occurred in later stages of the Kirghiz epic tradition's history may relate, if at all, to its earlier development. On this matter the lens of empire, or at least state, may be a useful instrument in conjunction with the frame of cultural context—useful for noting both what it brings into focus as well as what remains outside its depth of field.

Russia's was only the latest state presence in the background of the Kirghiz epic tradition, and as a result of its recent arrival on the scene the epic reflections of Russia are fairly simple. There are more problems surrounding the portrayal of other powers, owing to their longer presence in Kirghiz thought and the dearth of historical sources. Already in the mid nineteenth century when the earliest texts from the tradition are found, the epics' portrayals of Qalmaq and Qıtay infidels and of Muslim Sart townsmen refracted Kirghiz bards' and audiences' quasi-historical perceptions of three influential states with which their chiefs contended: the Zunghar Empire, mainly in the early eighteenth century; the Ch'ing Empire that conquered and replaced the Zunghars in the 1750s, creating Hsin-chiang the 'New Borderland' in East Turkestan; and the Khanate of Khoqand, whose army's rapid expansion into the Tien Shan region in the 1820s was a prelude to Russia's in the 1850s and 1860s.[69] The main foes in

67 H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912); John T. Koch, ed., *The* Gododdin *of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).

68 Prior, "Patron, Party, Patrimony"; Prior, "Foreword" and "Introduction to a Reading of the Tradition," in Saghïmbay, *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan.*

In some cases, a heroic epic may emerge ostensibly in conjunction with the rise of an empire, or at least in a form that deals with a founder, as *Sunjata* and the Mali Empire: Ivor Wilks, "The History of the Sunjata Epic: A Review of the Evidence," in Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 25–58. Useful for comparison here is the *Secret History of the Mongols,* not a heroic epic as such but redolent of both oral heroic tradition and tendentious narration of power dynamics in the nascent Mongol Empire: Igor de Rachewiltz, ed. and trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century,* 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004–2013). A historicizing treatment like the *Secret History* seems a more likely literary result of catalytic processes in the rise of an empire than is heroic epic poetry, with its usual focus on independent chiefs (however royal their titles may sound).

69 Il'ia Ia. Zlatkin, *Istoriia Dzhungarskogo Khanstva (1635–1758)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1964); Nicola Di Cosmo, "The Qing in Inner Asia: 1636–1800," in Nicola Di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank, and Peter B. Golden, eds., *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age* (Cambridge:

Kirghiz epic were Qalmaq and Qıtay heroes, reflecting Zunghars and Chinese (in the latter case also to some extent Manchus, though the epics use distinct ethnic terms for them as well).[70]

As a thought experiment, the table below can be used to imagine how the Kirghiz viewed, or might have viewed, Russia (Kirghiz: *Orus*). The table portrays concepts of the ethnic identification of peoples in the tradition down to the mid nineteenth century.

Figure 1. Main ethnic concepts in the Kirghiz epic tradition.

	Sedentary:	Nomadic:
Muslim:	Sart	Noġoy
Infidel:	~~Qıtay~~ →	→ Qalmaq Qıtay

The upper right-hand cell serves as the focal point of the epics' ethno-religious geopolitics, where "we," Muslim nomads, can be found. The ethnic group to which Manas and the other main heroes belonged was Noġoy (Noghay), a conceit stemming from long-standing steppe tradition. The heroic Noġoy are to be understood as the real Kirghiz' wishful self-conception. The Kirghiz, when they appeared in the epics, were downtrodden weaklings.

In which box do the Orus belong? The enemies of the Noġoy – the only enemies who really mattered – had to be nomadic; other peoples were nonentities in the heroes' eyes. This is demonstrated by the different depictions of the Qıtay and the Sarts. Having appeared on the historical scene in the eighteenth century and swept decisively to domination in the 1750s, the Ch'ing state ruled over the eastern Kirghiz until their control weakened in the 1820s; and already by the 1850s the Qıtay were seen in Kirghiz epic not as the actual sedentary population of China, but rather reimagined as a tribe of nomadic warriors. Apparently the epic world, set in an indeterminate past era, excluded the possibility that the formidable Qalmaq foes of old could once have been beaten and brought under domination by a settled race. The Khoqand Khanate did not pose a threat to the Kirghiz' independence for very long. Its Sart population, never reimagined as nomads, remained on the periphery of the epic world, dismissed and belittled for lack of valor; moreover their Muslim

Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 333–362; Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand.*

70 Daniel Prior, "Sino-Mongolica in the Qırğız Epic Poem *Kökötöy's Memorial Feast* by Sağımbay Orozbaq uulu," in Ákos Bertalan Apatóczky and Christopher P. Atwood, eds., *Philology of the Grasslands: Essays in Mongolic, Turkic, and Tungusic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 230–257; Dávid Somfai Kara, "'Kalmak': The Enemy in the Kazak and Kirghiz Epic Songs," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 63:2 (2010), pp. 167–178.

identity would have inhibited their reconceptualization as fitting foes of the Muslim Noġoy.

In such a schematic picture, the infidel Orus of Kirghiz epic would seem at first glance to belong in the lower left-hand box as sedentary infidels, resembling in their settled ways the Muslim Sarts more than the infidel Qalmaqs or Qıtay. To continue the thought experiment: what might have happened to the image of Orus if the Russian Empire's advance into Kirghiz territory had not impinged on the Kirghiz chiefs' independent agency, and thus their patronage of heroic epic poetry? Would the Orus have stayed unheroically in the lower left, or joined the Qıtay as reimagined nomadic infidel heroes? There is a tiny bit of evidence that suggests this fate was possible. In the version of *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan* taken down by Wilhelm Radloff in 1862, the formidable infidel nomadic hero Joloy Khan is not of the Qalmaq as the tradition usually identifies him, but of the Orus.[71] Whether this was the bard's whimsy in an ironic moment facing his Russian patron Radloff, or a trace of a trend of thought in the conservative oral epic tradition, is unknowable.

Conclusion

This article has examined traditional genres of Kirghiz oral poetry: epic, testament, and lament. It has crossed a great distance in terms of both time and artistic expression, from the poetic image of a deposed Uzbek khan wishing that his sons would send him a telegram (along Russian-built wires), to that of a Kirghiz chieftain who, among numerous indicators of his prestige, was the first of his people, in death, to unlock Russian tear ducts. Between these two temporal and cultural signposts of Russian rule in Central Asia, the genres analyzed here have shown how the local effects of imperial hierarchy may find only subtle expression in Kirghiz oral poetry. Because of their genre contexts, our materials, especially the earlier ones, seldom show direct marks on Kirghiz life caused by the people's position within the imperial frame.

71 Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff,* pp. 144–145 (line 144), 204–205 (1536). Complicating the simple equation *Orus* = Russian in Kirghiz epic parlance is the fact that the name Orus was current in Central Asia long before the Russian expansion. Ūrūs Khan of the Jochid Ulus was a kinsman and nemesis of Tokhtamish in the late fourteenth century; by the early seventeenth century his name was associated with the label *Alach/Alash,* which became a Kazakh tribal name and gained wide currency as a designation and war-cry of both Kazakhs and Kirghiz (Joo-Yup Lee, Qazaqlïq, *or* Ambitious Brigandage, *in the Formation of the Qazaqs: State and Identity in Post-Mongol Central Eurasia* [Leiden: Brill, 2016], pp. 150–152). The label *Orus* also denoted Qazaqs of the Ural region in the usage of Abū 'l-Ghāzī in his historical work, *Shajarah-i Turk* (Aboul Ghâzi Bèhâdour Khan, *Histoire des Mogols et des Tatares,* ed. and trans. Baron Desmaisons, 2 vols. [St. Petersburg: Imprimerie de l'Académie des sciences, 1871–1874]). (The name Ūrūs may itself be derived in some way from the old Turco-Mongol term for the Rus', *Orus,* widely used in medieval sources including the *Secret History of the Mongols.*)

Wide-angle issues of cultural history relate to the points that this article has been examining close-up. Elsewhere I have proposed a distinct era in the Kirghiz epic tradition after the last northern Kirghiz chieftain submitted to Russia, in 1867, and before the massive changes caused by Soviet cultural policies and folklore collecting, starting in the 1920s. This Twilight Age of the Kirghiz epic tradition can be clearly defined in terms of both text and context: after the pacification of the Kirghiz chiefs under the new Russian regime, the records of the oral epic tradition show profound changes in the structures of the plots of the poems. On the surface the epics were still "about" the familiar heroes and incidents, and a cursory reading might find little notable change; but their narrative structures and underlying ethos shifted as the former warrior chiefs, who had been the main patrons of epic bards, disengaged by necessity from their ways of living and fighting that had provided for their imaginative investments in the world of the epics. The epics about the paramount hero Manas's struggles with his Muslim allies against heathen Sino-Qalmaq powers gave way in popularity to the epics of Manas's orphaned only son Semetey and his only son Seytek. In these epics in the older Heroic Period, internal dissensions brought the late Manas's *stirps* repeatedly to the brink of collapse; in the Twilight Age the existential tensions in these plots loosened, and the once-endangered house of Manas avoided worldly and spiritual disaster.[72] Similarly, as the analyses above have shown, the allied genres of chieftains' testaments and laments, though they were still performed and did important cultural work in Kirghiz society under Russian rule, lost a significant degree of the existential charge that had kept them in close correspondence with the genre of heroic epic poetry.

I have sought not to define the tsarist period in the Kirghiz epic tradition (earlier work by me on the Twilight Age has already done that to some extent), or to explain the nature of the relationship between the genre of heroic epic poetry and the phenomenon of empire, but rather to make some of the features of the Twilight Age of the Kirghiz epic tradition more susceptible to historical discussions on cultural change in the context of empire. The overt "arguments" in the Kirghiz' epics, testaments, and laments in the tsarist period were with few exceptions notably laconic or aloof regarding the presence of Russia. The amount of attention paid in laments, at a remove from the more conservative, keystone genre of epic, did increase over time. As a mature intellectual pursuit in a traditional culture, heroic poetry offers rich material for cultural history. But it is not really in the nature of such poetry for its singers to comment on sociopolitical and historical conditions as such, so much as to vaunt or abhor its heroes, as convincingly as they can for the times. Though focused on prominent men of the elite, poems in the genres of epic, testament, and lament had to reach and gain approval by broad audiences. Thus the profound investments of bards,

72 Prior, *The Twilight Age of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition;* Prior, "Sparks and Embers of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition."

patrons, and audiences in their shared enterprise of oral tradition, expressed in colloquies that require often intricate reconstruction, evince outlines of an intellectual cross-section of the largely non-literate Kirghiz society of the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century. For this era historians have found scant native source materials to compare with neighboring peoples' relatively abundant written records, where an accent on Central Asians' intellectual agency as Muslims is often sought or revealed. Sources from oral tradition may reward the special care they require in handling, if suitable questions are asked of them. It is for historians of empire in Islamic Central Asia of the tsarist period to decide what questions, if any, they may profitably ask of this tradition.