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SOVIET EPIC SINGERS

BY MUKHTAR AUEZOV



THE rich tradition of the heroic epic and its storytellers has been preserved with extraordinary completeness by the Kirghiz people. One celebrated epic singer was the aged Sagymbai Orzbekov; it was his rendition that the humble teacher Abdrakhamov used when he first set down in writing the great epic poem *Manas*. The writing took four years, both winter and summer, with minor interruptions, from 1923 until 1927. The heroic folk poem was of unprecedented, unheard-of length: 240,000 lines of verse. This was more than twice as long as *Book of the Czars*, the longest epic work in the world, longer than the *Shakhamm* of Firdousi with its 100,000 lines of verse. It was the first time that this particular epic had been set down in writing, after many centuries of oral performance.

The singer Sagymbai recounted how the inhabitants of one valley or another used to make an agreement with him in advance for a performance in the coming winter. The families would get ready for a performance in one of their homes and would store up meat, flour, and butter. The performances of *Manas* would be given throughout the long winter, right up to the first spring sheep hunt.

Drawing by Yurkunas.

Born in 1897 into a nomad family of Kazaks, MUKHTAR AUEZOV is the author of more than twenty plays, many short stories, and a four-volume novel about the famous Kazak hero Abai. He is an authority on the folklore of Asiatic Russia and has been instrumental in transcribing on paper those epics of Homeric length which the famous singers have handed down over the centuries.

For four years, Sagymbai sang the section of the epic dealing with the exploits of the valiant hero Manas for the first full written transcription. This epic is a generic cycle and is sung about a father, Manas, his son, Semetei, and his grandson, Seitek.

Sagymbai the writer considered himself above all a singer of songs about Semetei. At his death in his sixty-seventh year he managed to finish only the story of Manas and had not yet got to the son and the grandson. After Sagymbai, a second talented epic writer and singer of Manas, Sayakpai Karalaev, produced three more cycles in the course of several years. This brought the full text up to 400,000 lines of verse. The septuagenarian Sayakpai finally finished the epic in 1940. Today he performs separate episodes of the epic for the Kirghiz Writers' Union and the philologists and historians of the Kirghiz Academy of Sciences. He appears at folk celebrations, in theaters, and at great folk gatherings in his native Kirghiz Republic. An immense interest in the epic is growing in this area.

I have heard him many times. The last time, he was the honored guest at my 1957 jubilee, when my sixtieth birthday and my fortieth year of artistic endeavor were celebrated. He was among the guests in my home, and he sang an episode about the exploits of Manas' son, Semetei, for about an hour.

The performers of *Manas* sing the epic with the accompaniment of a musical instrument. They recite some passages, but mainly they sing the declamation and act out the events with the time-

honored techniques of dramatic mimicry. The epic writer Karalaev is a very talented performer, and you can listen to him for hours without tiring. He varies his intonation skillfully by making expressive gestures as he recreates the characters of different heroes or as he sings of violent battle scenes.

The ancient Kirghiz epic singers had faith in inspiration. They believed that, because it was not easy to learn an epic song of as great a length as *Manas*, their gifts had to be supernaturally inspired.

WE FIND epic song performers among all the Siberian peoples. There is much that is interesting and original in the Khakass rendition of heroic storytelling, for example. They usually seat the performer in a place of honor which is spread with a bearskin. He asks for his *chatkham*, a special musical instrument, and usually repeats, "I have come to you on foot. I have no horse. When I begin to tell my stories, my heroes gallop away on their fabulous horses and I can't go after them. Give me my horse and my *chatkham*."

They give him his seven-stringed instrument, and the listeners express the traditional wish that he sing a song which will never end, and that it be frightening in the middle, and that it make them laugh sometimes and cry sometimes.

And the singer announces, "I will sing to trap your hearts." He usually strums an invocation on his *chatkham* and then sings the *khai*, an extemporaneous melody sung in the back of the throat. Next he speaks in prose what he has just sung. The invocation is supposed magically to invoke the patron spirits of epic song. The listeners encourage the singer from time to time by shouting noises of approval, joy, and rapture.

The Shortzy, another Siberian group, sing poems to the accompaniment of the *kobusa*, or *kai komusa*. Their interpretation of epic singing is much like the Khakass. To begin with, there is an invocation sung in the throat either as a prelude or as a separate part of the narration. And then, as in the Khakass interpretation, there is the prose narration. Heroic or epic poems of the Shortzy people have a strict form, with regular strophes at the beginning and end of the song.

Another Siberian people, the Yakuts, have quite a different interpretation of epic singing. After the Kirghiz, the Yakut people have preserved the greatest number of songs in the oral tradition. There are their famous *olonkho*, songs made up of as many as 10,000 lines of verse.

The *olonkho* singer covers his ears during the performance to make his song more resonant in his head, and his whole body sways in time to the

beat. Sometimes the *olonkhusut* (the performer) even closes his eyes during the singing. He does this, as he explains to the audience, to cut himself off completely from his surroundings. The *olonkhusuts* perform the epic unaccompanied by any musical instrument. But even so, the performance is rich with dramatic mimicry, intonation, and characterization. The combination of masterful interpretation and singing makes *olonkho* a vivid folk presentation.

The students of Yakut epics consider that *olonkho* loses a great deal of its charm in being written down; it becomes too literal. Once written down, the epics seem pale and inexpressive in comparison with the live presentation, when the moment determines how the melody will go. Each hero has his own special melody and special voice. When the narrative concerns animals, the *olonkhusut* does unexpected, expressive imitations.

In our time, the *olonkhusuts* appear at private family gatherings, at folk holidays, and in the clubs and theaters of Yakutsk. Sometimes contests between singers are organized in this republic—collective presentations, when one singer tells the story and another sings.

An especially ancient tradition of epic presentation is preserved by the Buryat people. A Buryat singer telling the *uleger* (heroic epic) is like the *shamman* performing his magic rites. Before the arrival of Buryat hunters in a region, Buryats observe certain rites to appease the spirits of the beasts and the forests, on whom the outcome of the hunt depends.

At night the singer-hunter spreads out a white pelt in his hut and lays down on it burned juniper branches and a cup of wine or milk with an arrow stuck in it, and he sings his epic song until the first rays of dawn. Formerly, this virtually sacred act was supposed to be the hunters' gift to the spirits of the Siberian forests. The text of the *uleger* therefore has incantations and magic symbols which are drawn from hunting practice.

The Buryats, like the Kirghiz, believe in *utkha*, the doctrine that hereditary gifts are inspired by supernatural powers. The former Buryat *rapsod* is now the hereditary singer of *uleger*. He is not only a singer, but a priest or *shamman* as well. This individual and this form of presentation probably reproduce the ancient tradition of a special cult of epic singers.

The epic is kept alive by many peoples of the Soviet Union—the Kazaks, the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tadzhiks, Kara-Kalpaks, and several groups in the Caucasus. These epics are now being published for the general reader in many of the languages of the Soviet Union and are being studied by specialists in the university world.

Translated by Gabriella Azrael.