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Kyrgyzstan's 'Manas' Epos Millennium Celebrations: Post-Colonial Resurgence of Turkic Culture and the Strategic Marketing of Cultural Tourism

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty first century, the global cultural tourism market is characterised by unprecedented access to major heritage sites. Consequently, emerging nations which are in the process of developing tourism products, require strong and differentiated brands to improve their imageability and position themselves effectively in the mind of prospective consumers. In the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, there has been a resolute attempt to employ the pre-eminent national heritage icon, Manas, in this respect. Batyr-khan Manas is the principal hero of the Manas epos, an acclaimed collection of epic tales which tell of the formation, life, struggles and triumphs of the Kyrgyz people and represent the highpoint of a widespread Central Asian oral culture. The significance of this heroic epos, some 553,000 lines in total, was highlighted in 1995 when the Kyrgyz government spent an estimated US\$8 million on celebrations for the Manas epos millennium event and UNESCO declared 1995 the 'International Year of Manas' in recognition of its importance in human history.

Given the current renaissance of Turkic culture in the region and attempts by many nation states, including Kyrgyzstan, to preserve its integrity, it is not surprising that Manas has come to symbolise the embodiment of the Kyrgyz self-image, spiritual unity and independence. Against this backcloth of both nationalistic and Turkic cultural resurgence and the rapid development of tourism in the region, the paper is broadly concerned with the political, cultural and potential economic significance of Manas and the millennium event. The paper addresses the symbolic nature of the Manas epos and its influence on both the unification of Kyrgyzstan and the enhancement of the country's national and Turkic identity. The case of the Manas epos millennium celebrations event is then used to illustrate the relationship between the uses of the Manas 'legend' in the construction of a national identity and in the positioning of the cultural tourism product. The paper subsequently assesses the potential usefulness of the Manas epos in the creation of a destination image for Kyrgyzstan and in the positioning of Kyrgyzstan in the global tourism marketplace.

TOURISM, CULTURE, HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

The commoditisation of 'culture' and the rise of 'cultural tourism' are ultimately dependent upon emphasising those features and characteristics that define a place and its people as unique and on generating interest and translating this into tourist demand. Britton (1991: 464) defines cultural tourism as occurring '*where cultural sites, events, attractions and/or experiences are marketed as primary tourist experiences*'. Other authors claim that the concept of cultural tourism may be linked to historical events, sites and attractions, and that heritage tourism itself may form part of a cultural tourism category (Anderson, 2001). At the beginning of the twenty first century, the global cultural tourism market is characterised by unprecedented access to major heritage sites. In the International Scientific Committee on Cultural Tourism (ICOMOS) Charter on Cultural Tourism (1976: 2) 'cultural tourism' is described as a form of tourism where the discovery of monuments and sites is a key aspiration of the tourist. Craik (1997: 121) elaborates further upon this suggesting that cultural tourists not only seek to discover but

seek to learn about *'...people lifestyle, heritage and arts in an informed way that genuinely represents those cultures and their historical contexts'*.

However, tourism's employment of culture as a selling tool involves selectivity and 'competing constructions' rather than absolute truths (Seaton, 1998). Genuine representations of culture and historical events are notoriously problematic. Places, peoples and pasts are part of a symbolic economy that trades on cultural identities and markers of histories, and as such they are contested and negotiated by those who produce and consume them.

The extent to which competing constructions exist within a destination, in particular with respect to the representation of culture, has been questioned (see for example, Mellinger, 1994; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). To what extent can a shared sense of national heritage and culture amongst indigenous populations ever be attained? Witoszek (2001), examining the relationship between collective memory and national identity in Sweden, Germany and Italy, argues that, in accordance with ideas belonging to the Tartu School of Semioticsⁱ, culture exists as a non-hereditary memory of a society expressed in a system of symbols and norms. However, despite culture, as a symbolic object, being open to redefinition over time, the idea of shared cultural symbols is not refuted by Witoszek (2001: 1) and 'memes', 'imaginative units of social memory which preserve and mediate communal identity or communal crisis over time', are proposed to exist. The importance of 'cultural identities' in the light of increased transnationalism and globalisation and the potential demise of the nation state has also been noted (Clark University, 2001).

In post-communist nations, previously imposed national consciousness and collective culture appear to encourage the creation of revised cultural identities linked to pre-communist ethnic heritage (Rorlich, 1999). Bichel (1997: 3) discusses how, with respect to countries in Central Asia, newly elected national identities are expressed with a heavy emphasis upon ethnicity and *'have at least as much to do with self-expression and self-assertion as they do with historical evidence, precedent or cultural revival'*. In short, national identity building in these countries is perceived to be a direct response to avoiding being re-conquered. Fairbanks (2001: 52) notes how, *'leaders such as Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan have defied long odds to save their countries from dissolution or re-absorption into a new Russian empire'*. These attempts to sustain independence result in national identities being created that resemble 'ethnic nationalism' whereby patriotic feeling is based on *'...the perception of cultural or historical links where only members of this ethnic group are nationals of the state'* (Oxford Young European Society, 1999: 1).

The uncertainty and turbulence of the new global economic order, and in particular the dissolution of the USSR, have had profound effects on Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan. The resurgence of this republic has been driven by post-industrial activities associated with the increasingly sophisticated cultures of consumption, rather than traditional targets of growth promotion strategies: industrial and manufacturing production and employment (apart from the mining of rare metals such as gold)ⁱⁱ. Within this context, there has been a growing recognition of the role of culture in framing and

shaping the country's economy and society resulting in attempts to develop a cultural strategy for regeneration.

The cultural or historical links selected as the basis for the creation of a post-communist identity pre-date Soviet rule and can only be understood within the context of the history of the ethnic Kyrgyz population.

The historical context of Kyrgyz culture and identity

The culture of each region within Central Asia, as with regions of Europe, is eclectic, a product of thousands of years of spatially constrained historical events. Although archaeological evidence of settlements in Kyrgyzstan may be traced back 300,000 years, it was not until the 16th century that the Kyrgyz people migrated to the land today called Kyrgyzstan. The history of the land and its people is complex, but key periods within Kyrgyz history are highlighted in Figure 1, in order to provide a brief insight into factors shaping the traditional cultural heritage of the indigenous Kyrgyz people (Bashiri, 1999a; KSATS, 1999).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Epic poetry in Central Asian Culture

Epic poems (also known as 'epos' or 'dastan') have been identified as a historically and culturally significant feature of the intangible heritage of Turkic nations by, *inter alia*, Reichl (1992: 15):

...it is important to realise, when discussing Turkic oral poetry, that it ... is intimately connected to the complex and diverse historical development of the Turkic tribes and nations.

Such poetry is significant, not merely for reasons of artistic merit, but rather for its role as an ornate oral history, passing value systems from one generation to another. It is argued that all Altaian epic poems are the reworking of a 'mother epos', fragments from which have been preserved and embellished by new experiences (Inan, 1968, Togan, 1972). In Siberia, the Altaians and Yakuts have incorporated the shamanistic rituals of their ancient belief systems into their poetry, whilst Arabic literature has left its mark on the epos of the Ottoman Turks and Uzbeks. More poignant, however, are the common Turkic traditions which are in evidence throughout the epic poetry of Central Asia: 'Every aspect of the life of the heroes ... bears vestiges common to Turkic culture' (Yologlu, 1995: 38).

At a time when access to the Soviet Union was still restricted and the preservation and publication of nationalistic epos little encouraged, Paksoy (1989) accounted for at least fifty mainstream epos in Central Asia alone. The actual figure may be higher. The core of Turkic epic poetry has been created by the nomads of the Steppes, in particular the modern Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples (Reichl, 1992). Of the 50 Turkic epics to be published by the Turkish Language Institution as part of a preservation project, 34 are

from Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz epic poetry is an elaborate and exceptionally detailed oral history of the most important triumphs and set backs of the Steppe tribes and can be related to various periods of their history.

KYRGYZ EPOS AND MANAS

As a result of their nomadic and war-like existence, constant intermingling with other tribes, and later the oppression of Tsarist Russia, it was not until the October Revolution of 1917 that the Kyrgyz acquired a written languageⁱⁱⁱ. The prolonged absence of a written language and the subsequent reliance on the oral method of passing on information has led to a series of epic poems which are argued to be exceptionally rich in historical fact and tradition:

Everything the people had learned, created, experienced for many centuries was preserved in an oral artistic form. Folklore became the memory of the people, the keeper of all its achievements, ideals and conceptions, knowledge and reminiscence – all the facts about its historical development (Musayev, 1994: 95).

Among the 34 Kyrgyz epos identified by the Turkish Language Institution, by far the longest, best known and most enduring is the Manas epos. This epos can be divided into three volumes which tell of the life and death respectively of Manas, the leader of the Kyrgyz tribes during the most successful period of their history, his son Semetei and grandson Sejteik.

Whilst there is no agreement among experts regarding the origins of the Manas epos, it is believed that the first volume refers mainly to the time of the Kyrgyz Great Power in the ninth and tenth centuries (Auezov, 1961; Auezov, 1999) and that the main events portray the conquering of Chinese Turkestan from the Uyghurs. Most scholars believe that Manas was the military figure who led this conquest and who died in 847AD (Auezov, 1999). Historical documents from as early as the fifteenth century make mention of the Manas epos, however the second and third volumes of the epos (Semetei and Sejteik) are thought to represent the struggles of the Kyrgyz against the Kalmaks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Jhirmunski, 1999). This chronological confusion supports the view that the events portrayed in Manas are layered as a result of its protracted composition (Musayev, 1994), representing historical events over an extended period of the history of the Kyrgyz nation. Thus, one can identify in the different layers historic events and mythological plots alongside ancient beliefs and everyday activities.

The outline of the plot adheres to the pattern of the epos genre in Central Asia, whereby the exploits of a hero (*Alp* or *Batyr*) on behalf of his people are related by special bards (*akyn*). However, unusually for the genre, the narrators of the Manas epos, (*manaschi*), do not normally accompany themselves with any musical instrument. The skill of the narrator is judged not only by his knowledge of events and details, but also by his creative talents in being able to compose his own variant, said to be inspired by prophetic dreams. Thus, deviations exist in the plot of the epos across different variants, caused by the creative will of the *manaschi* and the school with which he is connected (Musaev,

1994). There are currently 65 versions of the epos maintained in manuscript form by the Kyrgyz National Academy of Sciences, all recorded in Kyrgyzstan.

Promotion and suppression of Manas in recent history

Recording of the Manas epos began towards the end of the C19th, the first fragments ('Manas' Childhood', 'Marriage of Manas' and 'Funeral Feast for Kokotoy') being written down and translated into Russian by a Kazakh traveller and ethnographer, Chokan Valikhanov in 1857. Valikhanov is recognised as having discovered the Manas epos and his description of it as the 'Iliad of the Steppes' is still widely cited. The period immediately following the October Revolution saw the recording and transcription of the two longest and best known versions of the Manas epos. The first was recorded between 1922 and 1926 from the *manaschi* Sagynbay Orozbekov in the old Arabic script and comprises more than 180,000 lines. The second version, recorded from Sayakbay Karalaev is the longest ever recorded (over half a million lines), incorporating all three volumes of the epos. It was written down between 1935 and 1937 in Latin script. Orozbekov's version, whilst shorter, is thought to be the most authentic, as the Soviets are believed to have enforced politically motivated omissions and amendments on Karalaev's version.

The 1930s was a period of great scientific interest in the Manas epos, however many attempts to record, study and preserve the epos were suppressed by the Soviets. At first, those involved in the research and publication of Manas were persecuted^{iv}. Later, attempts were made to prevent performances or recitals of the epos^v. The recording of Karalaev's version of the Manas had taken place as a prelude to a 1000 year jubilee of the epos which was planned initially for 1937, then rescheduled twice for 1940 and 1947 (Bayjiev, 1999a). In the event, this jubilee did not take place until 1995. Publications which had been produced for the jubilee were burnt and the authors arrested. Many of those responsible for research into the Manas epos were imprisoned, disappeared, or were shot, including the scientists who had made the famous recordings from Karalaev and Orozbekov. The reasons for the suppression of the Manas epos were perceived pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic undercurrents which were damaging to the common, supranational culture that the Soviets were promoting (Paksoy, 1989). It was asserted by the Kyrgyz Communist Party that 'bourgeois nationalists' had encouraged the *manaschi* to introduce anti-Soviet sentiments.

In the 1950s the discussion was reopened and a five day conference was held on the Manas epos in June 1952 for scholars from all over the Soviet Union. This conference went some way to educating Soviet leaders on the historic and cultural significance of the Manas epos, concluding 'that the national epos Manas was a national work, expressing thoughts and expectations of working classes and that a summary variant should be created, having completely taken 'anti-popular' features out of it' (Bayjiev, 1999b: 239). However, at that time very little of the Manas epos had been translated into Russian and those fragments which were published in Russian between 1945 and 1949 related a great Kyrgyz victory over the Chinese. Out of context these fragments had a certain nationalistic fervour and ultimately hindered the staging of the long awaited jubilee. In

the late 1970's there were again calls for permission for the staging of a 1000 year jubilee, however it was not until after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the declaration of the new Kyrgyz Republic that the 1000 anniversary celebrations of the Manas epos were finally hosted.

Manas as a cultural icon

Manas may be identified as an iconic figure, upon which the Kyrgyz cultural identity is based. The use of an iconic figure in national identity building is not unusual in itself (Alexander Nevsky for Russia, William Wallace for Scotland and St. George for England, for example).

Witoszek (2001) remarks upon the way in which narratives, rites, characters and icons often function as referents of national identity. Speaking of the Manas expert Mukhtar Auezov, Bashiri (1999b) reports how Manas has been argued to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries as an iconic figure belonging to all Turkic people regardless of socio-economic, political and geographical affiliation.

This assertion obscures our (Western) comprehension of the adoption of Manas as a cultural icon in comparison with our understanding of tourism employment of other iconic figures, particularly celebrated UK icons such as Robin Hood, King Arthur, William Wallace and Owain Glyndŵr. In particular, it is interesting to explore the extent to which the legend of Manas is accepted as a shared form of national heritage and culture not only within a single nation, Kyrgyzstan, but also, across a whole region, Central Asia.

The naming of Manas in other Turkic epics (Musayev, 1994) suggests that belief in Manas is shared to some extent across other nations in Central Asia. However, Manas is solely utilised in the national identity promoted by the Kyrgyz people. Hence, for marketing purposes, he offers the potential for Kyrgyzstan to differentiate itself from other Central Asian nations. It has been envisaged that, in future, the Manas epos may be used to promote self- and collective consciousness of the Kyrgyz nation (Okeeva, 2001). However, the possibility also exists for Manas to become an integral element of the heritage tourism product of the Kyrgyz Republic. In order to achieve this, there is a need to increase the level of awareness of the Kyrgyz epic outside of Kyrgyzstan.

PROMOTING MANAS: THE 1995 MANAS EPOS MILLENNIUM CELEBRATIONS

Hallmark events both influence and are products of the society, economy and the environment in which they are located and, as a result, are 'explicit and implicit political occasions' (Hall, 1992: 84). The 'image engineering' or image building associated with such events creates a situation in which both personal and institutional interests receive a high degree of visibility although, it is the macro-political level we are concerned with here. In other words, the paper focuses on the power of the event to advance particular political objectives by effectively using the high media profile to strengthen ideologies and to

highlight certain features, themes and values in order to change the perceived meaning and structure of place.

Amidst the chaotic political geography of Central Asia, emerging nations like Kyrgyzstan are attempting to reposition themselves for a global audience by creating a distinctive image in the interests of differentiating the country from competitors, attracting investment and enhancing touristic appeal. Increasingly, special events are being viewed as an integral part of tourism development and marketing plans; they are the image builders of modern tourism and are the primary means by which tourist destinations are placed or kept on the map (Hall, 1992). Hallmark events at national, regional and destination levels have been used to develop a favourable image in the international marketplace (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988). In marketing destinations, marketers select and illustrate certain aspects of society and culture which reflect and reinforce preferred interpretations from the overall stock of cultural knowledge and information (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Kyrgyzstan's Manas Epos Millennium Celebration in 1995 is a useful example of a hallmark event at national level focusing on a particular, preferred, facet of culture. However, the aim of enhancing the external image of Kyrgyzstan as a culturally rich destination may be argued to have been secondary to the key objective of rebuilding and reinforcing a shared national identity for the newly independent state.

On 26th June 1992, less than a year after Kyrgyzstan became an independent state, President Akayev declared plans for the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Manas epos. Given the lack of clarity over the exact period of origin of the epos, the date of the celebration can be said to be largely extraneous. The Kyrgyz government gained the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which agreed to undertake the role of disseminating information about Manas on an international level and declared 1995 'International Year of Manas' as part of its international calendar of events, reflecting UNESCO's interest in masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity (UNESCO, 2001). The Manas millennium celebrations took place throughout the whole of 1995, but culminated in a four day event at the end of August. The total cost of the four day event alone is reported to have totalled more than 8 million euro (Mayhew *et. al.*, 2000), an enormous sum for a country whose GNP in the same year was estimated to be approximately 700 euro per head of population (World Bank, 2000). The majority of the financial burden was borne by the Kyrgyz government, however UNESCO also provided some funds as part of their program for the preservation of world heritage.

Nature of the event, its objectives and legacy

The substantial cost of the event to the Kyrgyz government bears witness to its strategic importance, which can be examined in terms of three key objectives, outlined in Akayev's decree (see Asankanov & Omurbekov, 1995): the promotion of national identity in the wake of independence and following a period of cultural repression, the raising of awareness of the cultural and historical significance of Manas among the people of Kyrgyzstan and the promotion of the Manas epos and its traditions on an international scale. The Manas epos is described as the encyclopaedia of the Kyrgyz

nation. It has been described as the single most important source of historical, sociocultural and geographical information about the Kyrgyz people (Galieva, 1995). Additionally, the Manas epos has acted as a major influence on all art forms among the Kyrgyz people (Asankanov & Bekmuhamedova, 1999), having been described as the 'tuning fork' of Kyrgyz art (Lusanova, 1995: 99). Its appeal, not just for its artistic and literary merits, but also as a living epos containing the entire folklore of the nation, makes the Manas epos a logical tool for the promotion of national identity. Furthermore, the epos embodies the idea of unification of all Kyrgyz tribes under an exemplary leader and defender in an epoch when the Kyrgyz nation was at its most powerful. The society depicted in the epos shows many of the characteristics of a modern democracy, including equal rights, free elections and a council of elders (Galieva, 1995), characteristics which a fledgling democracy might aspire to.

A three day conference entitled "'Manas' Epos and the World's Epic Heritage' took place during the August celebrations. This conference examined various aspects of the epos: its role as a historical-ethnographic source, the reflection of ethno-cultural links in the epic works of Central Asia, the study of the variants of the Manas texts, socio-political aspects of the Manas epos and the role of Manas in the arts (see Askarov *et. al.*, 1995). During this conference the evidence for the existence of Manas as a real historical figure was discussed. Connections between the epos and ancient monuments and historic sites in Kyrgyzstan were observed

As part of the Manas 1000 celebrations, operas and plays composed mainly in the 1930s, which had been based on Manas but were rarely staged during Soviet times, were reinterpreted and performed. All of the theatre which took place during the event was performed by amateurs. The involvement of children was achieved through an open exhibition of children's art entitled 'Manas Through the Eyes of Children'. In the Talas region, at the *Manas Ordo*, where Manas is said to have lived and died, there was a re-enactment of fragments of the epos, filmed by the distinguished director Tolomish Okeev which involved over three thousand people from the local area. The costumes and set were elaborate and expensive, but amateur actors and actresses played all the roles, which encouraged the learning not only of the lyrics of the epos, but also of traditional music, cuisine and games. Contests, in the form of recitals of parts of the Manas epos, had taken place throughout the first half of the year and the prize-winners were assembled in Bishkek and Talas for the August event. Also present were those few *manaschi* still alive. A primary objective was to identify potential future *manaschi* among the prize-winners, in order to maintain the oral tradition.

The goal of promoting Manas abroad was equally emphasised in the orchestration of the event. For a small and relatively insignificant country like Kyrgyzstan, ownership of the world's longest epos presents the opportunity for creating a competitive advantage, particularly where that epos is so strongly associated with the history, culture and folklore of the country. An event of this scale (and expense) was seen as a vehicle for the international recognition of Kyrgyzstan as an independent state with an educated population and a rich cultural heritage. It was further felt by those familiar with the

Manas epos, that such a key literary and scientific work should be accorded greater significance world-wide.

Fifteen countries were represented at the millennium event, including the presidents of Turkey, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. The United Nations Director General, Federico Mayor, was also present. The Manas epos was translated and published in fourteen languages for the event, a remarkable achievement given its length and complexity. These translations were partly funded by UNESCO, which also financed the publication of some of the promotional and educational literature for the event and funded the filming of a video for international distribution, capturing the culture and customs of the Kyrgyz people and exhibiting the dramatic landscape of the country. Two institutions were set up with the aim of publicising the existence of the Manas epos and its rich content nationally and internationally: the State Directorate for the Promotion of the Manas Epos and the Manas Heritage Organisation.

As part of the attempt to widen the destination product portfolio and promote a new destination image, the event was the catalyst for the construction of several visitor attractions on the Manas theme. A visitor complex was established at the *Manas Ordo* in the Talas region. This incorporated a visitor centre, Manas museum, a theatre and an arena for playing the national game *ulak-tartysh*. A Manas Heritage Village (*Manas Aiyly*) was built on the outskirts of Bishkek. This heritage village is a representation of the *Manas Ordo*, the village where Manas and his people lived, constructed out of modern materials but inspired by images from the Manas epos (weaponry, costume etc.) In the centre of Bishkek, at the front of the Philharmonic Hall, an elaborate monument was constructed to the *manaschi* who kept the epos alive. Opening ceremonies for these visitor attractions took place during the four day event in August.

The legacy of the event can be judged in terms of its success in promoting Manas and its traditions nationally and internationally. Within Kyrgyzstan itself, views have been expressed that there were few long-term outcomes of the 1995 Manas epos event (Okeeva, 2001). Certainly, in financial terms the event was not a success; heavy expenditure on domestic promotion of the event hampered generation of profits. However, examining the event from an external perspective and discounting any short-term economic motives, several positive outcomes may be noted. In particular, after years of Soviet oppression, the event enabled the Kyrgyz people to publicly celebrate and disseminate national pride and cultural identity without fear of retribution.

On a national level, Manas has become a potent symbol of the new state of Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, the publicity created by the event has hastened the drive to preserve the oral tradition and the Manas epos itself. In 1997 the United Nations Development Programme allotted US \$150,000 for a project untitled 'Support for Manaschis and Akyns'. UNESCO also continues to partially fund the two organisations set up at the time of the event, although these have been reduced in size and importance due to lack of government funding. A recent achievement has been the transferral of all sixty 65 of the epos to CD-Rom. On an international level, however, the degree of success in enhancing external awareness of the cultural legacy of the Manas epos is arguably more difficult to

measure. The perceived importance of Manas in creating a destination image for Kyrgyzstan can, however, be partially gauged by examining current destination marketing practices and themes.

CREATING AN APPROPRIATE DESTINATION IMAGE FOR KYRGYZSTAN

In strategic management terms, the use of the Manas epos event to attract publicity and tourists should not be separated from the broader context of tourism development and destination marketing including the creation of an appropriate image and identity, which is an important element in the process of positioning a place product. Currently, both the Kyrgyz tourism product and the Republic itself could be described as under-positioned because awareness of the destination in the world's major tourist generating areas is poor; market exposure to either actual experience of the Republic or media images has been limited. As a result, Kyrgyzstan remains undifferentiated from its neighbouring Central Asian States, with the exception of the more discerning end of the market. The country's 'official' tourism marketing continues to be dominated by images of mountains and lakes and is reflected in the promotional strap line: 'land of sky high mountains' (KSATS, 2001). This is understandable given the Republic's comparative advantage in natural resources, but given that most countries highlight their physical beauty and that Kyrgyzstan has hitherto positioned itself as 'Asia's Switzerland' (Haberstroh, 2000), there is a risk of product substitutability.

The Manas legend has an important role to play in positioning the Republic because it represents the country's 'core values' (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002). Manas symbolises the Kyrgyz self image in terms of the way in which they prescriptively see themselves as historically constructed and culturally re-constructed and thereby captures the spirit of the country and in that way differentiates it from other Central Asian countries. Whilst a belief and interest in the Manas legend is shared to some extent across other nations in Central Asia because it features in other Turkic epics (Musayev, 1994), it is associated with only the Kyrgyz national identity. The use of Manas in promoting Kyrgyzstan through events and official tourism literature therefore represents an effective means of developing a more romantic image of, and a spiritual attachment to, the country. Reference to this pre-eminent national icon also serves to highlight the post-Soviet resurgence of Kyrgyz culture and the need to identify a unifying force to address the country's marked religious, cultural and political divisions. Additionally, it underlines a shift in emphasis away from the traditional over-dependence on the nation's natural resource-based tourism towards a more balanced product based on a broader cultural formula. However, using Manas to market the country more effectively through the development of a personality for the place brand, although evident, is as yet underdeveloped.

Marketing Manas: 'official' images of Kyrgyzstan

Images of tourist destinations are created, filtered and mediated through cultural and ideological structures (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Therefore, brochure material often draws on indigenous markers and cultural symbols to represent the product and reinforce

particular ways of seeing and interpreting the destination. The overall portrayal of Manas in the official promotional literature is generally consistent with the legend understood by the Kyrgyz people and is not misrepresented in the way that Transylvanian tourism marketers have distorted the factual history of their national hero, Prince Vlad, by promoting the fiction of Dracula. Moreover, there appears to be little danger that the commercialisation of the Manas epos in the Millennium celebrations and subsequent promotions will degenerate into a commodified spectacle which could obscure the country's real history, present a packaged landscape for tourist consumption and ultimately achieve little more than a triumph of image over substance.

An indication of the way in which Manas has been characterised in order to market cultural tourism products in the post-Millennium period and a measure of the government tourism agency's respect for the legend can be gained by examining the official tourism marketing literature. Current government agency and tour operator brochures, whilst clearly making reference to cultural tourism and the Manas epos, continue to feature prominently the tourism products based on the country's abundant mountains and lakes. A statement in the Kyrgyz State Agency of Tourism and Sports 'Kyrgyzstan: Land of Sky-High Mountains' brochure underlines this point, 'nature is the main wealth and resource of our country' (KSATS, 2001: 4), as does the title of the brochure. This emphasis is not surprising given that 94 % of Kyrgyzstan is mountainous and that the republic is still struggling to find its political and cultural identity having been one of the most Russified of the former Soviet states, particularly in the north of the country.

The aforementioned brochure does include a special feature entitled, 'In the Land of Legendary Manas' which outlines the significance of the epos, provides a brief summary of its content and highlights areas of the country which are directly connected to the legend. An example of the latter is the 'Promised Land' of the Talas valley where numerous natural and man-made monuments bear the Manas name. The brochure claims that in the Talas valley it is possible to 'obtain a strong insight into and appreciation for the immortal epic of Manas' (p.24). It goes on to inform the prospective visitor that twenty kilometres from the town of Talas, near the village of Tash-Aryk, lies an ancient cemetery where the fourteenth century Gumbaz (burial tomb) of Manas is located. This tangible relic arguably reinforces the Kyrgyz ownership of the Manas legend, particularly given the intangibility of the epos' oral tradition in Central Asia. The historical evidence would therefore seem to suggest that this iconic figure represents more than mere Kyrgyz folklore and self-expression. Moreover, Manas' recognition throughout the region suggests that a significant latent inbound cultural tourism market exists which, in turn, could reinforce the association between Manas and the Kyrgyz national identity.

It is interesting to note that the two-page Manas feature in the 'Kyrgyzstan: Land of Sky-High Mountains' brochure is one of four; the other three relate to the country's natural environment and are longer than the Manas feature which appears after the others at the end of the 26 page brochure. The Central Asian Tourism Corporation's (2001) 'Great Silk Road Tours' brochure features Manas and the epos under an ethnography section at the start of the brochure (p.6) but does not mention the legend elsewhere, even when featuring sites which are connected with Manas. The World Tourism Organisation

(2001) 'Silk Road' brochure also lists the 'Tomb of Manas' as an attraction (p.15), but no other details relating to Manas are given. Similarly, the Glavtour (2001) 'Kyrgyzstan' brochure mentions the Manas Aiyly heritage village in Bishkek (p.14) but there are no other references to Manas in the 72 page document. Overall, the low-key promotion is perhaps surprising given the importance of Manas to the national psyche and the cultural bias of many of the brochures, but it serves to illustrate the somewhat cautious approach that is being taken to marketing Manas.

The low key brochure images also reflect the relatively slow development of Kyrgyzstan's cultural tourism product. Whilst, the Ministry of Tourism acknowledges that historic sites throughout the country associated with Manas are important places of pilgrimage for domestic tourism and international visitors from other Central Asian countries (Akmatova, 2001), their development, including that of a 'Manas Trail' is hampered by several factors. The State Agency for Tourism and Sport has few funds, and priority is given to the development of international tourism because the domestic tourism market is in decline due to the low income levels of the majority of the population. The Talas region, which is most closely associated with Manas, is difficult to reach from Bishkek and best approached from Dzhambul in Kazakhstan. This can lead to visa problems for international visitors. Additionally, the Talas region appears to have little to offer the overseas visitor and the interpretation of the Manas Ordo site is principally directed towards domestic visitors as a place of pilgrimage. In the short-term, these difficulties represent constraints on the development of cultural heritage tourism in Kyrgyzstan. In the longer term, there is perhaps an opportunity to ensure that a more authentic cultural heritage tourism experience of place is developed and sensitively marketed for tourist consumption.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Manas represents a powerful symbol of resurgence and unity in a country with marked political, economic and cultural divisions. What is less clear is whether or not Manas, within the context of the tourism master plan and cultural development strategy, has the potential to contribute to long-term stability and prosperity by attracting, rather than repelling (as in ancient times), the raging hordes, or whether the spectacle of the Manas epos is a short-lived phenomenon and represents a fleeting moment in the country's turbulent reformation. Given the literary and historic significance of the epos and its strong association with Kyrgyz history, culture and folklore, however, its political and cultural influence is likely to be significant.

It is likely that Kyrgyzstan's abundant natural resources, particularly its mountains, will continue to dominate both images of prospective visitors and their subsequent experience of the country. In tourism terms, the promotion of Manas generally, and the Manas epos event specifically, has nevertheless helped to address the imbalance by highlighting authentic cultural heritage as both a key component of the tourism product and an element with significant potential for future development. The emergence of a distinctive identity from the country's mixed blessing of heritage has also improved the Republic's imageability and strengthened its position in the tourism marketplace. Politically, in

addition to Manas' current role in differentiating Kyrgyzstan from its Central Asian neighbours, the legendary spiritual and military leader of the nation is once again playing an important part in unifying the Kyrgyz tribes, strengthening Kyrgyzstan's national identity and spearheading the development of the Republic's cultural strategy for regeneration. The Manas epos is a significant cultural heritage that is shared throughout Kyrgyzstan and as such, it is a strategic common denominator with which people on both sides of the Republic's political divide can identify. However, given the aftermath of September 11th and the fact that Islam strongly influences the south of the country, it is difficult to determine whether a poem, even an epic such as the Manas epos with its powerful symbolism, can help to achieve all of the government's development objectives.

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Figure 1

Key Periods within Kyrgyz History
200BC - The Kyrgyz were ancient Turkic tribal people, inhabiting land around the region of the Yenisei River in southern Siberia.
1000AD - Under the leadership of a heroic leader (Manas) the Kyrgyz had overthrown the Uyghur Empire (in the geographical area now known as Mongolia) and established a Kyrgyz Khanate in its place, extending from Lake Baikal to the Irtysh River and from the present Krasnoyarsk City to the great Chinese Wall.
1207AD - Following the Mongol onslaught, led by the troops of Ghenghis Khan, the Kyrgyz settled as mountain-dwelling pastoral nomads in the grasslands of the Tien Shan and the process of Islamisation occurred.
1876AD - The Kyrgyz were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Kyrgyz grazing lands were confiscated by Russian peasants.
1916AD - Tsar Nicholas II drafted Kyrgyz youth into the Russian army.
1920-1930AD - During the command of Stalin and collectivisation, the Kyrgyz were forced to abandon nomadic practices and made to settle in makeshift towns and villages.
1930- 1940AD All manifestations of the Kyrgyz past were diluted or dissolved in efforts towards Soviet collectivisation and industrialisation. Russian became the official state

language, legal codes, death rituals, pilgrimages, circumcisions, and Islamic marriages (all adopted as Kyrgyz practices) were forbidden.

1991AD - Independence was gained from the USSR, the Kyrgyz Republic was formed. Today, it is led by Central Asia's only non-Communist president, Askar Akayev, and has a democratic government and a free market economy.

ⁱ According to the Tartu school of semiotics, Moscow, 'culture' is defined as a collective semiotic mechanism for the production, circulation, processing, and storage of information. It is both a collective memory and a program for the generation of new messages. It regulates human behavior and how humans project structuredness upon the world.

ⁱⁱ In 1995, industry (including mining, manufacturing, power, construction, logging and fishing) contributed an estimated 24.3% of GDP and provided 19.3% of employment. The services sector contributed an estimated 32.1% of GDP and provided 38.7% of employment (World Bank, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is generally agreed that the Kyrgyz people used a written Turkic language called orkhono-yenisei in circa C7th, however this language was not preserved. For more information see Malov (1952) and Paksoy (1995).

^{iv} Torekul Aitmatov, father of the famous modern day author Chingiz Aitmatov, was one of the first Manas researchers to disappear. His remains were found in 1991 in a mine near Bishkek, with 127 other men.

^v In 1938 the playwright Kasym Tynystanov, creator of the modern Kyrgyz alphabet, was shot for including an episode from Manas in one of his plays.