

# The Religious Faith of the Kyrgyz

DANIYAR ASHYMOV

## Introduction

This article is a kind of compendium, bringing together information and research by specialists studying the history, culture and religion of Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan is a multiethnic and multifaith society that is part of 'Eurasia' (the countries of Central Asia). The development of democratic reforms in the Kyrgyz republic has enabled the provision of many basic human rights, including the right to religious freedom.

The basis of state policy is now a tolerant attitude to other ethnicities and religions, intolerance of interfaith strife or the promotion of religious extremism, an aspiration towards interfaith harmony, and the strengthening of civic peace and harmony within society in accordance with the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan – our common home' (*'Kyrgyzstan – nash obshchi dom'*).

The Kyrgyz authorities are generally positive towards religion and its cultural and educational role. There is a revival of interest in the traditions and values of Islam, including moral values. Religious leaders have meetings with the president to discuss how they can play their part in fostering good relations between nationalities and confessions and promoting peace and harmony.

However, a democratic and open atmosphere attracts all kinds of non-traditional religious sects and also various extremist organisations. Religious policy thus acquires a strategic and ideological dimension, and the role of religion in politics and in the life of society becomes more important. (Toktosunova and Ashymov, 2001, p. 95).

## The Religious History of Kyrgyzstan

By the Middle Ages Central Asia had already been converted to Islam. However, with some of the various nationalities living in the region this process had taken longer than with others. The settled peoples of Central Asia were the first to adopt Islam; the Kyrgyz were the last to do so.

Ethnographers note the ancient ethno-cultural links between the Kyrgyz and the indigenous peoples of Siberia. The ethnic roots of the Kyrgyz lie in north-western Mongolia and eastern Siberia. Both the Kyrgyz and the peoples of the Sayan and Altai regions followed pagan, pre-Islamic religions before adopting Islam in the eighth century. One of the most ancient religious cults followed by the Kyrgyz is the

cult of Mother Umai (Umai Enye) (Moldobayev, 1999, p. 42), whom researchers have identified as the most important Central Asian goddess. Umai Enye was the patroness and protector of newborn and young children; she is still a living concept to this day. There are references to Umai Enye as a goddess alongside the gods Zher-Suu (earth-water) and Tenir (sky) in runic scripts dating back to the seventh and eighth centuries. We should note that in ancient Turkish the word *umai* means womb (*zhatyn* in Kyrgyz), the child's place of origin. It has the same meaning in Mongolian languages as well. In Tibetan, however, *umai* means mother, and this makes it clearer why she has been raised to the rank of goddess. Umai Enye assists at the birth of Manas, performing various rituals, in the eponymous Kyrgyz epic narrative, which I shall look at later in more detail.

A feature of early Kyrgyz religion was the totemic concept that people (tribes and nationalities) were related to certain types of animals and birds. Over 2000 Kyrgyz given names reflect a totemic origin. Kyrgyz tribes used to revere the animal whose name they bore; the animals were divided into the so-called large species, such as *bugu* (deer) and *bagysh* (elk), and the small species, such as *boru* (wolf), *uku* (owl), *zhoru* (vulture). In his *Zain al-Akbar* the eleventh-century Persian-speaking author Gardizi writes that 'many Kyrgyz revere the cow, while others revere the wind, or the porcupine, or the magpie, or the falcon' (Bartol'd, 1973, p. 48).

Along with all the Turkic-Mongol nationalities of Siberia and Central Asia, the Kyrgyz were familiar with Tengrianism, a cult of the sky. Right up to the twentieth century Tengrianism has been a very important element in the religion of the Kyrgyz people. Even now at difficult times in their lives the Kyrgyz recite the incantation '*Tenir koldoi ker*' ('Support me, sky'). When blessing or thanking someone, they would say '*Tenir zhalgasyn*' ('May the sky bless you'). When they were not getting on with each other they would invoke the sun: '*Tenir ursun*' ('May the sky punish you'). The deity of the ancient Turks and Mongolians Zher-Suu (earth-water) was just as important in the religious beliefs of the Kyrgyz, and supplicants made sacrifices to this deity during times of drought.

The Kyrgyz also honoured and worshipped natural objects such as healing springs, holy sites, graves and mazars. Travelling through Central Asia and throughout Siberia you can see numerous ribbons attached to trees and bushes situated near mountain roads, springs and other holy places. As one commentator notes:

There are numerous tombs of ancestors, Biblical prophets and legendary heroes in Kyrgyzstan. Around bushes and trees, on rocks and near caves, one may see sticks stuck into the ground with colorful pieces of cloth tied to them, these have been left by pilgrims as reminders of their prayers. Such places are called mazars. Many mazars – springs, waterfalls and fliers – are venerated. The most popular are hot and medicinal springs. Pilgrims often travel great distances to obtain a blessing, fulfill a vow, cure a sick child or seek a remedy for infertility.

The same commentator describes what she sees as the important functions of mazars:

They are important geographical sites. Very often mazars are situated close to hot springs, waterfalls, forests and stones. Their veneration preserves ecologically important areas between the territories of former tribes.

The conventional character of mazars allows traditional Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik culture to be maintained. Muslims regardless of ethnic affiliation venerate mazars.

They play an aesthetic role. Any pretty architectural monument or natural place can become a mazar.

They play a healing role. As a rule every hot spring is a holy place. Usually the origin and importance of a spring is linked with a Biblical or historical personage.

The mazars also mark territorial boundaries of different groups of former nomads, tribes or local communities.

They serve religious beliefs, spreading Islamic ideas.

The mazars maintain the ancient cult of ancestors worship, a peculiarity of local culture.

The mazars are focal points for local history, places to contemplate ancient legend and epics.

The mazars are linked with the resilience of the locals. Despite Soviet attempts to demolish and destroy them, the mazars have survived.

The cult of dead ancestors is extremely popular. Many Muslims in Kyrgyzstan believe that the dead pay visits to their surviving friends and relatives particularly on Fridays; women go to the cemetery on that day to make offerings and libations.

It is interesting to note that in different parts of Kyrgyzstan, different mazars are venerated. For example, northerners would be more likely to go to Gumbaz Manas (the tomb of Manas, the epic hero of Kyrgyz legend) in Talas, some of them taking clay from the tomb decorations to eat or drink as signs of their devotion. (Tabyshalieva, 2001, p. 180)

The Kyrgyz also have links with Zoroastrianism, which is preserved in the cult of the worship of fire. To this day the custom has been preserved of taking a bride into the home, which is called the *kelindi otko kirgizuu*, literally meaning 'bringing the bride into the fire'. Elderly people recall a time when the bride would have to jump over a fire.

Shamanism, known in Kyrgyz as *bakshy*, has played a significant role in Kyrgyz religion since ancient times. There was a distinction between white and black shamanism. The shamans were mainly concerned with curing illnesses, particularly neuro-physiological illnesses. Kyrgyz shamanism has its roots in southern Siberia, but it has much in common with Central Asian shamanism and has been influenced by Islam.

The cult of the dead and of ancestors, referred to as *arbak* in Kyrgyz, also features in Kyrgyz pre-Islamic faiths. These cults originate in animism. 'The spirits of the dead also take on a holy meaning, candles burn in their honour and rams are brought as sacrifices' (Valikhanov, 1985, p. 73).

Shamanism, Zoroastrianism and other pre-Islamic pagan faiths among the Kyrgyz have survived to the present day in an islamised form.

The Kyrgyz were also acquainted with Buddhism, or more accurately with its modified form, Lamaism. This is clear from the Buddhist terminology used in the Kyrgyz epic poem *Manas – kut, but, burkan, laailam, laanat* and so on. Many Kyrgyz living in China still practise Lamaism.

The Kyrgyz were of course also acquainted with Islam. The people living on the territory now known as Kyrgyzstan were first exposed to Islam in the eighth century, after the Arab invasion of Central Asia. But when did the Kyrgyz themselves start to find out about Islam? Academician Vasili Bartol'd dates the migration of some of the Kyrgyz to Central Asia to the ninth century, the time of the fall of the Uighur state in

840–47 AD, when it became possible for the Kyrgyz to extend the south-western borders of their country.

Within the Mongolian state, it is possible that all the Kyrgyz had converted to Islam by the fifteenth century. The name of a Kyrgyz teacher who lived from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries, Mukhammed-Kyrgyz, is evidence of this. Since that time the Kyrgyz have been Muslims, although the strict conservative Arabic-language Islamic canons did not succeed in completely altering the mentality and world-view of the nomadic Kyrgyz – dynamic, lovers of freedom and open to new experiences. Chokan Valikhanov, Nikolai Krasovskiy, Al'bert Lipsky and T. Tikhonov have all remarked that the Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs are Eurasian nomads, who differ from the neighbouring peoples of Central Asia in their ability to make rapid cultural adjustments and who offer a '*tabula rasa*': they have been quick to adapt themselves both to European Christian and to Islamic civilisations. 'The Kyrgyz are a talented tribe, foreign to Muslim inertia, and capable of embracing [European] culture' (Lipsky, 1907, p. 91).

The period during which the Kyrgyz were exposed to Islam and adopted the faith may be divided into the following stages:

1. From the ninth to the fourteenth centuries.
2. From the fifteenth century to the second half of the eighteenth century.
3. From the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.
4. From 1918 to 1991.
5. From 31 August 1991, the date of the declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic.

In the course of their development, then, the Kyrgyz have come into contact with the great pre-Islamic religions and at the same time they have been aware of Islam. By the nineteenth century all the abovementioned pre-Islamic religions had been islamised and beyond any doubt the ethno-cultural links between the Kyrgyz and the settled peoples of Central Asia played an important role in the islamisation of the Kyrgyz.

We should note that there are sharp contrasts between the religious orientation and level of religious practice of the Kyrgyz in the north of the country and those in the south; these have been determined by historical developments in the area. In the north the peculiarities of religious practice arise out of the close interweaving of Islam with pagan pre-Islamic faith systems and the adoption of Islam only in its external manifestations: rituals, traditions and festivals. Meanwhile the south of Kyrgyzstan has its own characteristic traits too, the result of the historical development of the ethnic groups populating the Fergana valley and the place of Islam among them.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Fergana valley was the heart of the Khanate of Kokand. The ethnic makeup of the population was very mixed, with about a dozen Turkish- and Iranian-speaking ethnic groups. One of these groups, the Sarts, were settled arable farmers, and more religious than the nomadic and semi-nomadic Kyrgyz, Kypchaks, Kurmans, Turks and other nationalities. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, religion had become an integral part of the identity of all these peoples, and Islam was by now the main basis of their understanding of common ethnic identity. Before the modern states of Central Asia came into existence, the ethnic groups in the region, nomadic and settled, Sarts and Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Kypchaks, Turks and Tajiks, understood themselves as forming part of the single territory of the Fergana valley, identifying themselves as 'Muslims' rather than as members of a particular nationality.

At the same time there was a wide variety of types of Islam in the Fergana valley,

including Ismailis and various Sufi sects, whose teaching differs markedly from that of Orthodox Islam.

Sufism occupies a special position. It developed initially as an ascetic movement, establishing a clear identity for itself in the ninth century, and retained its structures in Soviet times. It nurtured ascetics who rejected everything secular, gave priority to spiritual purity, despised luxury and wealth, and adopted a completely quietist attitude to the world around them.

Sufi sheikhs and ishans spread into the region of today's Kyrgyzstan in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Their aim was not so much to spread Islam but attract as their disciples influential leaders of various Kyrgyz tribes whom they could use to fight for political power. The distinctive feature of Islam among the Kyrgyz was thus that it was mainly spread by Sufis, and did not involve the building of mosques or the appearance of large numbers of clergy.

The redrawing of national frontiers in the Soviet Union in the period 1924–27 radically changed the situation in the Fergana valley. The application of a new principle of national identity led to the suppression of the traditional historical self-awareness which had developed among the islamised peoples, who called themselves Sarts or Muslims. Moreover, the borders of the newly formed states as drawn in the Fergana valley did not coincide with the areas of mainly Uzbek or Kyrgyz population. Thus 109,000 Uzbeks, 3631 Turks and 2667 Tajiks were left in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana valley, while 90,743 Kyrgyz, 32,784 Kypchaks and 21,565 Turks were left in the Uzbek part (Koichiyev, 1999, p. 28).

Despite what official statements said, it was in fact only slowly that the former nomads and semi-nomads in the Uzbek and the Kyrgyz sectors of the Fergana valley, who were never granted states of their own throughout the entire history of the Soviet Union's existence, became integrated with their titular nations. The problems in the south of the country caused by the fact that ethnic groups and their lands were divided up continued to smoulder without being resolved under Soviet rule, and broke out again with renewed vigour in the post-*perestroika* era. The period of *perestroika* in the final years of the Soviet Union brought with it a growth of national consciousness and a striving to reassert lost identity. Subsequent events have shown that the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley is now a repository of traditional regional consciousness, the reinvigoration of which may be defined from a contemporary standpoint as separatism. The re-Islamisation of the Fergana valley is an attempt by the settled population to revive its traditional self-awareness and to free itself from the national identity as defined in communist times.

## Conclusion

Geographical location and cultural history have enabled the northern Kyrgyz to adapt best to European culture, and the southern Kyrgyz to eastern and Arab culture, while the general traditional world view of the Kyrgyz is a mixture: Islamic teachings and customs combined with traditions inherited from a far-off pre-Islamic past. The oldest layer is animist: the belief that the natural world is inhabited by souls that have various kinds of relationship with human beings.

In conclusion, let us look more closely at the epic work *Manas*, to which I have already referred several times as a historical resource. *Manas* gives a unique insight into the distinctive spiritual culture of the Kyrgyz people, dramatising centuries of struggle against alien invaders. Every important change in the political, ideological and economic life of the Kyrgyz throughout their history has left its distinctive mark

on *Manas*, which is thus a unique encyclopaedia of the life of the Kyrgyz people. This epic work was composed over several centuries, although episodes from it first took written form less than 150 years ago. The hero, *Manas*, is not based on any one particular person. He holds fast to virtue, and this makes the epic a book of moral value as well as a historical narrative. Some say it is as morally educative as the Gospels. So far 60 versions of three sections of the epic have been identified. Parts of the original text have been lost, but more than half a million lines have been preserved, which makes *Manas* more than 30 times longer than the *Odyssey*.

For the Kyrgyz of Tyan'-Shan' *Manas* has played a key role in consolidating their identity in the absence not only of a strong centralised state administration but also of permanent political, cultural and religious centres at the time from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries when the Kyrgyz people was being formed in Tyan'-Shan'. This involved a lengthy process of cooperation and mutual influence between the two main components of the Kyrgyz people: ancient and medieval tribal associations, and Kyrgyz tribes properly speaking, the latter having moved to this region in the fifteenth century from the Irtysh and Altai regions.

*Manas* is also one of the main cultural treasures of the Kyrgyz people, and has played an important role in their history. In the absence of a strong religious or political tradition, the Kyrgyz turn to *Manas* to define their collective identity. The epic is a massive work, but every Kyrgyz knows its main story-line and can name all the main characters and recite key episodes. Many believe that it is *Manas* that binds the Kyrgyz together as a single nation.

*Manas* embodies the idea, progressive for its time, of the unification of tribes in the face of external danger, and in the person of 'Manas' Kyrgyz story-tellers, the *manaschi*, have created the figure of the ideal leader who could stand at the head of the nation and stiffen it against any enemy. It is rare that an epic tale should take its place alongside religion and other forms of ideology as a fundamental consolidating factor in the social awareness of a people; but just such an epic is the chief distinctive feature in the development of their own culture by the Kyrgyz people of Tyan'-Shan'.

## References

- Bartol'd, V.V. (1973) *Sobraniye sochinenii*, vol. 8 (Moscow).
- Koichiyev, A. (1999) 'Faktor religii v Ferganskoi doline', *Tsentral'naya Aziya: politika i ekonomika* (Almaty).
- Lipsky, N. (1907) 'Po gornym tropam Russkogo Turkestana', *Izvestiya Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* (St Petersburg), p. 41.
- Moldobayev, I (1999) 'Po sledam religioznykh verovaniy kyrgyzov (s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei)', *Tsentral'naya Aziya i kul'tura mira*, 1.
- Tabyshalieva, A. (2001) 'A glance at the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan', *Collection of Materials, UNESCO International Forum 'Culture and Religion in Central Asia'* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzskaya natsional'naya kommissiya po delam YuNYeSKO).
- Toktosunova, A. and Ashymov, D. (2001) 'Religioznaya situatsiya v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike', *Tsentral'naya Aziya i kul'tura mira*, 1–2.
- Valikhanov, Ch. Ch. (1985) 'Zapiski o kyrgyzakh', *Sobraniye sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Alma-Ata, Glavnaya redaktsiya Kazakhskoi Sovetskoj Entsiklopedii).

(Translated from the Russian by Helen Farrell)