

## MYTHOLOGIZED HISTORY AND POLITICS IN POST-SOVIET KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN\*

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this work is to show the role of mythologized history in the management of modern political processes in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The article analyses the causes of appearance of mythologized histories in the two republics of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The article evaluates the function and instrumental character of this phenomenon. Authors have demonstrated in a lot of examples that mythologized history is one of the tools by which an attempt is made to control the political process. Mythologized history plays an important role in both countries. It cannot be argued that this phenomenon is understood and interpreted in full. In any case, this phenomenon requires further study.*

**Keywords:** *Mythologization of history, invented tradition, policy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan*

**Rezumat:** *Istorie mitologizată și politică în Kazahstan și Kârgâzstan (în perioada post-sovietică). Scopul acestei lucrări este de a arăta rolul istoriei mitologizate în gestionarea proceselor politice moderne din Kazahstan și Kârgâzstan. Articolul abordează cauzele apariției istoriilor mitologizate în cele două republici din Asia Centrală, Kazahstan și Kârgâzstan. Studiul analizează funcția și caracterul instrumental al acestui fenomen. Prin diverse exemple, autorii demonstrează că istoria mitologizată este unul dintre instrumentele prin care se încearcă controlul procesului politic. Istoria mitologizată joacă*

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*un rol important în ambele țări. Nu se poate susține că acest fenomen este înțeleș în întregime și interpretat în mod adecvat. În orice caz, acest fenomen necesită studiu suplimentar.*

**Résumé : Histoire mythologisée et politique en Kazakhstan et Kirghizstan (dans la période postsoviétique).** Le but de l'étude ci-jointe est de montrer le rôle de l'histoire mythologisée dans la gestion des processus politiques modernes de Kazakhstan et Kirghizstan. L'article aborde les causes de l'apparition des histoires mythologisées dans les deux républiques de l'Asie Centrale, Kazakhstan et Kirghizstan. L'étude analyse la fonction et le caractère instrumental de ce phénomène. A l'intermédiaire de divers exemples, les auteurs démontrent que l'histoire mythologisée est un des instruments par lesquels on essaya de contrôler le processus politique. L'histoire mythologisée joue un rôle important dans les deux pays. On ne peut pas soutenir qu'on comprit ce phénomène entièrement et qu'on l'interpréta de manière adéquate. En tout cas, ce phénomène nécessite une étude supplémentaire.

## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which became the most important event of modern times, had occurred for several reasons. Among the factors that led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, one of the most important ones is the ethno-political processes. From the fifteen newly independent countries on the territory of the former Soviet Union five Turkish-speaking republics have been formed. Construction of the new states was accompanied by growth of ethnicity and national identity and consequently an increase in interest in the history of their nation. In this context, researchers should pay particular attention to the problem of ethnic- and political genesis, which are natural processes. Affirmation and evolution of new states must be analysed by means of their specific way throughout history, because every phenomenon, and especially the origin of a people and the state, must be traced and comprehended by means of their origins. Hence, the researchers' interest in studying such matters, as the loss of independence and the entry of ethnic communities into the tsarist Russia, is not circumstantial. These processes have not received in the preceding period an adequate approach and currently serve as the object of mythologizing.

Mythologized history has an instrumental character; therefore, it can manifest itself in many different forms. Under authoritarian rule, mythologized history assumes the character of official history, in order to validate the reign of a particular person, group and ethnic group. The above function of mythologized history has a negative impact on society, being used to justify the suppression of the people. In addition, mythologized history often gives the base for inter-state, inter-ethnic, ethno-religious conflicts and territorial disputes. Feedback on the

masses is a distortion of historical identity, xenophobia, and, of course, the celebration of mythologized history is due to the suppression of historical truth.

Functions of mythological histories are multifaceted, but the most important are the legitimation of education of the state and its borders (often meant that the present territory is much smaller than the territory occupied by the ancestors of the people, therefore prerequisites for claims to its neighbours).

Mythologized history has long attracted the attention of researchers from around the world. The great importance for understanding the nature of mythological history was played by the work of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*<sup>1</sup>, and E. Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*<sup>2</sup>.

American researcher M. B. Olcott<sup>3</sup> devoted one work to the problem of fabrication of the social past in Kazakhstan. The *Nawriz*, an invented tradition in modern Kazakhstan, was investigated by H. C. Eitsen<sup>4</sup>. Japanese Historian T. Uyama<sup>5</sup> wrote the article about rethinking ethnic history of the Kazakhs. The role of the mythological history in the political life of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan has been shown in the books of E. Marat<sup>6</sup> and N. Masanov, Zh. Abylkhozin and I. Erofeeva<sup>7</sup>.

Starting from the achievements of modern historiography, we will analyse mythological history in the social-cultural life of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The political elites of the new states see mythologized history as the link between the past and the future, and this "past" also legitimizes the existence of new countries. This phenomenon exists in one form or another in all post-Soviet states, but this

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Gellner E., *Nations and Nationalism*. New York, Cornell University Press, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Olcott M.B., "The Fabrication of a Social Past. The Kazakhs of Central Asia", In *Political Anthropology Yearbook 1: Ideology and Interest: The Dialects of Politics*, edited by Aronoff M.J., New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Eitsen H. C. *Nawriz in Kazakstan: Scenarios for Managing Diversity. Contemporary Kazaks. Cultural and Social Perspectives*, London, Curzon Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Uyama T. Rethinking Ethnic History of the Kazakhs, in "*Chiki Kenkyu Ronshu*", 1999, Vol.2, no.1, 85-116.

<sup>6</sup> Marat E. *National Ideology and State-building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center Johns Hopkins University-SAIS - Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Масанов Н.Э., Абылхожин Ж.Б., Ерофеева И.В. *Научное знание и мифотворчество в современной историографии Казахстана* [Scientific knowledge and formation of myths in a modern historiography of Kazakhstan], Алматы, Дайк-Пресс.

article will only consider the case of two of them – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This choice is not accidental: both countries are located in Central Asia; Kazakhs and Kyrgyz formed on an ethnic basis; ancestors of both nations had recently engaged in nomadic pastoralism. But, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, various political systems emerged, a more democratic one in Kyrgyzstan and a more authoritarian in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, both societies created mythologizing histories for themselves. The reason and how mythological history is used in different conditions will be discussed in this article.

### METHOD

The mythologization of history is understood as the process of creating a quasi-scientific version of the past, which is based on the structure of the myth: the cyclical time; notion of the “Golden Age”; kulturtraeger and missionary role played by the ancestors of the ethnic group or groups; the insidious enemy; assign all greatest national achievements to the territory and habitat, which were much wider; the return of the “glorious antiquity”.

Understanding the role of mythologized history in society is possible by using the theory of nationalism, and in this respect especially useful were the works of E. Hobsbawm<sup>8</sup>, B. Anderson<sup>9</sup>, E. Gellner<sup>10</sup> mentioned above.

### GROUP CENTRISM AND HISTORY OF KAZAKHSTAN

After the proclamation of independence, new documents have been introduced into scientific usage and many previously closed topics have been covered. Before 1990, the works of honest researchers were persecuted by the Soviet myth-makers of “official” history. Historical science of Kazakhstan is currently experiencing an upswing produced by new historical journals, published researches, including banned by Soviet censors. In general, professional historians of Kazakhstan, who suffered because of the totalitarian regime, preserve scientific traditions and do not participate in the formation of mythological history. But, it can be noted that, in addition to scientific studies, there appeared the mythologized version of the past. Nursultan Nazarbaev himself, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, did not deny the existence of this

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<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm E., *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Gellner E., *Nations and Nationalism*. New York, Cornell University Press, 1983.

phenomenon<sup>11</sup>. As a rule, this version of the past is forged by the representatives of technical sciences, who believe that the history of Kazakhstan was created by professional historians on the request of the authorities and needs to be rewritten<sup>12</sup>. Characteristically, even the name of one of the books illustrates this idea: *Alternative history of Kazakhstan*. All this is combined with the existence of the tribal structure of the Kazakh society. In recent years, and especially in the first years after independence, a lot of books, pamphlets, articles related to individual tribes and their bloodlines have appeared in Kazakhstan. Along with the work of professional historians, based on medieval eastern and western sources and covering the previously unknown pages of the past of Turkic tribes, works of amateurs are published<sup>13</sup>. The main purpose of these non-professional “studies” is to artificially extend the past of a Kazakh family and tribe. Their attention to the history of the tribes was highlighted by the foreign researchers<sup>14</sup>.

Many “discoveries” in search of prestigious ancestors of some Kazakh tribes were made by physicist E. Omarov<sup>15</sup>: the Kipchaks were declared as descendants of the Scythians and Saks. No less prestigious and ancient ancestors of Argyn were the Huns, or precisely the White Huns - Ephtalits. The same idea underlies the work of a mechanical engineer Sh. T. Kuanganov<sup>16</sup>. In correspondence with this idea sometimes the Scythians and the Huns are proclaimed as Kazakhs.

Attempts to prove a Kazakh affiliation to another great conqueror – Genghis Khan, stressing the political significance of this idea: “Due to the fact that Genghis Khan belongs to a particular people, including the Chinese, is of great geopolitical importance, and may in the future even become part of a larger policy goal of this book in an attempt on the basis of scientific research to establish the truth about the origins of the Kazakh state and Genghis Khan” - writes K. Danyarov<sup>17</sup> in his

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<sup>11</sup> Назарбаев Н., *В потоке истории* [In a history stream], Алматы, Атамұра, с.38.

<sup>12</sup> Galiev A., *Mythologization of History and the Invention of Tradition in Kazakhstan*, in «Oriente Moderno», 2016, Vol. 96, no. 1, 46-63.

<sup>13</sup> Абдираманулы А., *Мудрость народа: генеалогия от сары и коньрата* [Folk wisdom: the genealogy from Sarah and Konyrat], Алматы, Рауан, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Akiner Sh., *The formation of Kazakh Identity. From Tribe to Nation State*, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996, p.58.

<sup>15</sup> Омаров Е., «Скиф» плюс «сак» равно «скифсак» и «кипчак». *О происхождении кипчаков* [Skif plus Sak is equal “skyfsak” and “кypчak”. About origin of кypчak], Вестник университета «Кайнар», 1997, вып. 2, с. 31-33.

<sup>16</sup> Куанганов Ш.Т., *“Арий-гун” сквозь века и пространство: свидетельства, топонимы* [“Ariy-gun” through the centuries and space: evidence, toponyms], Алматы, Билим, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Данияров К., *Альтернативная история Казахстана* [Alternative history of Kazakhstan], Алматы, Жыбек Жолы, 1998, с.7.

book. The history of Kipchak has been considered through the prism of the conquest of Genghis Khan: “Kazakh historians sought to completely separate Genghis Khan from his conquests, and in contrast the Kipchak origin of the Kazakh people has been invented”<sup>18</sup>.

Mythologized history is usually based on falsified sources<sup>19</sup>. These historical works appeared in the early period of the sovereign Republic of Kazakhstan. Then they began to take concrete steps to establish an ideology for a national-stately independent construction, and at that time, the questions of the liberation struggle history of the Kazakh people were placed in the forefront of the Kazakhstan media<sup>20</sup>.

In Kazakhstan, there are not a lot of professionals engaged in mythologizing of the past, and, probably, our publishing products replenish the deficit of scientific works created in other Turkic regions<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, there were also representatives of the “advanced” schools of mythologizations in our country. In particular, M. N. Abishev<sup>22</sup> has made an attempt to revise the history of Kazakhstan in terms of “new chronology”.

The phenomenon of mythologized history has encompassed the entire post-Soviet space, including Kazakhstan. Here, the nomadic tradition division into tribal groups has not been yet eradicated, and the representatives of these ethnic communities are still trying to gain a foothold in various sectors of the economy and society, including History.

### **“KYRGYZ GREAT POWER” AND MODERN KYRGYZSTAN**

The Kyrgyz Republic is one of the five newly independent states of Central Asia. The weak economy of the country, ethnic conflicts, tribalism, constant political crises do not provide confidence in the future. However, the past of people has been depicted in the most vibrant colours. It is fully forged.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Таусар К., *От предков к нам* [From ancestors to us], Алматы, Талас, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Масанов Н.Э., Абылхожин Ж.Б., Ерофеева И.В. *Научное знание и мифотворчество в современной историографии Казахстана* [Scientific knowledge and formation of myths in a modern historiography of Kazakhstan], Алматы, Дайк-Пресс, с.165.

<sup>21</sup> Лайпанов К.Т., Мизиев И.М., *О происхождении тюркских народов* [On the origin of the Turkic people], Черкесск, 1993; Каримуллин А.Г., *Тюрки и индейцы Америки: истоки происхождения* [The Turks and Indians of America: Origins], Алматы, Издательский Дом «Кочевники», 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Абышев М. *Эра Золотой Орды и формирование социо-культурных систем. Новый взгляд на историю* [The era of the Golden Horde and the formation of social and cultural systems. A new look at the history], Алматы, Билим, 2007.

Therefore, K. S. Musayev, in his book *History of the Great Kyrgyz-Kipchak Empire*, argues that the age of the Kyrgyz people is six thousand years<sup>23</sup>. There are two main lines of myth-making. First, modern Kyrgyz have connected with local autochthonous tribes. As glorious ancestors declared different ethnic antiquity groups and the early Middle Ages, had “in their ethnic element the name «az»”: arimaspi, Yueh-chih, Arsi, Turgish, Saks, Massagets, apasiaki, Oguz, Usuns, Issedones, Tochars, sakarauki. The author also included in this group the ancient Kyrgyz. All these people are recognized as one of the two branches of the ancient Turks (second – kuna)<sup>24</sup>. As elsewhere in the Turkic mythologized history, Saks and Scythians have been regarded as Turkic-speaking ethnic groups<sup>25</sup>. Some mythmakers identify Huns with the Kyrgyz. A few authors describe all epic events in “Manas” as a reflection of the Hun time, which they call the era of “on” (i.e. hoon)<sup>26</sup>. The writers underline that this era was a favourable age for the Kyrgyz<sup>27</sup>.

The second line of modern myth connects the Kyrgyz people with the Kyrgyz Khanate, established in Siberia.

Each of these lines solves only one problem - the autochthony or the age of the people. To solve this dilemma, an international conference on the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz was held in celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the epic “Manas”, which in its resolution noted that the origins of the Kyrgyz people and their culture can be found in the territory of Central Asia, Eastern Turkestan and Southern Siberia<sup>28</sup>.

Ch. Valikhanov (1985) addresses the problem of identity of the Siberian and Tien Shan Kyrgyzs. Based on the data and “on the testimony of the people themselves, who completely refute it, do not know and do not remember their displacement and unanimously consider the Anjan mountains to be their homeland”, he argues that one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the Kyrgyzs were Anjanian: “The *dikokamennye* [wild-stone] Kyrgyzs indeed have

<sup>23</sup> Мусаев К.С. *История Великой Киргизской империи* [History of the Great Kyrgyz empire], Бишкек, Ала-Ту, 1999, с. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Эсен К., *Азия или кочевники Азы* [Asia or nomads Azy], Бишкек, Илим, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Абылгазиева А.К., Богатырёв В.Б., *История и идентичность: Кыргызская республика* [History and Identity: The Kyrgyz Republic], Бишкек, 2007, с.23-24.

<sup>26</sup> Абакиров К.А., *Общие вопросы исследования системы образов эпоса "Манас"* [General questions of the study of the system of epic images Manas], “Universum: филология и искусствоведение”, 2016, Том 33, вып. 11, с. 5-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Бернштам А.Н., *История кыргыз и Кыргызстана с древнейших времен до монгольского завоевания* [The history of Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan from ancient times to the Mongol conquest], Бишкек, Айбек, 1998.

lived in the present places, i.e. in the mountains from Kashgar to Andjan, for a long time”<sup>29</sup>.

The Kyrgyz people are often presented with the idea that they are one of the oldest in the world, the creators of a unique civilization. But the answers, referring to the Kyrgyz people “what ancient people do you remember / with which ancient people do you associate / do Kyrgyzs associate?” show a slightly different picture: Usuns - 0.2%; 2) Saki - 0.3%; 3) The Turks - 1.9%; 4) Yenisei Kyrgyz - 2.4%; 5) The Persians - 3.1%; 6) The Mongols - 4.2%; 7) The Scythians -5.1%; 8) The Huns - 18.3%; 9) Chinese - 19.3%; 10) Other - 7.3%; 11) No answer 37.9% – i.e. the majority of Kyrgyz citizens either do not know the works of mythmakers, or connect somehow the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyzs with the Chinese people<sup>30</sup>.

Despite numerous attempts by the government of Kyrgyzstan to present the Kyrgyzs as one of the oldest ethnic groups in Central Asia, and despite the efforts of the official celebration of the 2200th anniversary of statehood of the Kyrgyz people, the majority of residents have not been convinced yet.

Moreover, the worldview of the Kyrgyz people has a stronger line with the settled peoples of Transfergana or its surrounding area, such as the Iranians, Greeks, Uzbeks and even nomadic Kazakhs and Kipchaks, rather than with the Yenisei people, who are geographically, culturally and religiously remote from them<sup>31</sup>.

According to sociological studies carried out in Kyrgyzstan, in answer to the question «Which of the most prominent personalities of the ancient history of Kyrgyzstan should be the Kyrgyz national hero?» 27.5% of respondents replied – Genghis Khan, 19.2% – the heroes of the epic “Manas”<sup>32</sup>.

Kyrgyz historians also face the primordial choice: Yenisei or Tien Shan. Both hypotheses in line with this concept are mutually exclusive. If Yenisei’s hypothesis favours exclusive antiquity, it casts doubt on the legitimacy of land ownership. At the same time, the option for the autochthony, justifying this right, makes it impossible to talk about a two-thousand-year period of statehood.

The mythologized history of Kyrgyzstan is a reflection of its economic status. It is known that the country is among the poorest countries in the world. The shutting down of factories and unemployment forced people in search of sources of income to leave the republic. This not only leads to permanent

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<sup>29</sup> Валиханов Ч. *Записки о киргизах* [Notes about Kyrgyzs], Алматы, Главная редакция Казахской советской энциклопедии, 1985, с.59.

<sup>30</sup> Абылгазиева А.К., Богатырёв В.Б., *История и идентичность: Кыргызская республика* [History and Identity: The Kyrgyz Republic], Бишкек, 2007, с. 26-30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

“revolution” and the unstable political situation, but also makes politicians look for a way out of this situation. To stabilize the climate in the country and promise a bright future for the people, the political class uses a myth based on a cyclic pattern. The mythmakers speak of a “golden age” in the history of the people – “Kyrgyz great power” – a boastful celebration of an invented date – the epic “Manas”. In order to confirm this version, the great past has been invented. However, the connection has not been established between the Yenisei and the Tien-Shan Kyrgyz yet.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, on the basis of the material relating to the seemingly so different post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan we can draw several conclusions.

Firstly, mythologized history is actively used by various circles to achieve their goals, especially the seizure of power, or for its retention. This unscientific version is a tool and servant policy.

Secondly, despite the fact that mythmakers always claim that they, unlike the professional historians, recreate the real picture of the past, in reality, they design a comfortable version. Since mythmakers represent different clans, groups, power-hungry, they also created many incompatible versions of the past.

Mythologized history legitimizes the situation in the country, or, on the contrary, highlights the illegality of the existing order.

The “old” traditions, which are presented as a revitalization of true folk customs, are in fact not a revival, but an invention. In fact, only the institutions involved in the maintenance of the existing government were revived. Although they play a role in modern society, they are not elements of the social antique system. These institutions are no more than appendages of the modern state system, without any real power. In some cases, an appeal to the traditional institutions is an argument for the usurpation of power (Khan's power).

The studied materials show that mythologized history is given an important role in society. It cannot be argued that this phenomenon is fully understood and adequately interpreted. In any case, this phenomenon requires further investigations.

The problem of mythologized history has been recently the subject of scientific study in the former Soviet Union. Almost all professional historians and political scientists acknowledge the importance of this problem. However, mythologized history of the Central Asia's nations is still poorly explored. Basically, all the researchers believe that mythologized history is characterized by certain distinctive features. For example, N. Masanov, Zh. Abylkhodzhin and

I. Erofeeva call such features as the absence of a clear understanding on the part of the mythmaker that history is a scientific discipline. The mythmaker does not understand the nature of the work of professional historians, does not know the methods of working with historical sources<sup>33</sup>. In general, we agree with the opinion expressed by N. Masanov, Zh. Abylkhozhin and I. Erofeeva. However, these texts should not be called historical works. They must not be used against their authors, but the term “historiography” (even non-scientific) cannot be applied to this kind of descriptions. This genre’s most suitable name could be unscientific fiction.

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<sup>33</sup> Масанов Н.Э., Абылхожин Ж.Б., Ерофеева И.В. *Научное знание и мифотворчество в современной историографии Казахстана* [Scientific knowledge and formation of myths in a modern historiography of Kazakhstan], Алматы, Дайк-Пресс, с. 165.