

TELLING THE IMAGES. EXPERIENCES OF VISUALISATION IN THE STORYTELLING  
PERFORMANCES OF KYRGYZ MANASCHI

*Sally Pomme Clayton\**

Shall we start to tell the stories  
of young antiquity afresh,  
through the spirit they will run  
like news from God.

*Manas Epic (Kyrgyzstan)*

The experience of storytelling is rooted in the process of visualisation. After storytelling performances I have often heard listeners express how they felt transported somewhere else. This paper examines ways in which images become present when stories are told.

My approach is performance centred, exploring the multiple layers of experience that happen in performance, from the specifics of the performance itself, to its wider meanings. The paper takes Richard Schechner's premise that "transformation of consciousness" (1985) is central to performance, examining how visualisation is key to transformation in a storytelling event.

I have noticed I am able to visualise stories while listening to tellers speaking in languages I don't understand, leading me to wonder what conjures images in a storytelling event. I explore these questions with *Manaschis*, Urkash Mambetaliev, Qabar Atabekov and Asan Ullu Tilek who perform the *Manas* epic of Kyrgyzstan. Their conversations reveal how visualisation is connected to processes beyond words, arising from the physical presence of the performer and maintained by the communities imagination.

VISUALISATION AND THE STORYTELLING EVENT

Visualisation happens while awake and asleep, running along inside us, behind our activities. Whether we are conscious of it or not, visualisation seems to perform a vital function in the psyche. Visualisation involves all the senses, not just sight. Psychologist J. J. Gibson describes visualisation as "a distribution of energy on a sensory mosaic" (J. J. Gibson 19:84). My own experience of visualisation is that it is layered and multi-sensual, encompassing emotions, desires and histories. It is a physical experience, involving the body and one's body of memories.

My Grandfather told stories, transporting us to the Fairy Queen's palace and her mysterious Major-Domo. The Major-Domo stood silently beside the palace door, he would wink, come to life, solve the Queen's problems and return to silent waiting. As a child I thought my Grandfather must have met the Major-Domo. His stories were so nourishing I started to tell stories to my sister and cousins. We lived a nomadic life and stories helped carry the threads from place to place, later storytelling became my way of life. When my Grandfather died I realised he had been a Major-Domo, solving our upsets and diverting us from our fears. At his

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*Sally Pomme Clayton, Telling the Images*

memorial I told a folktale I had been telling for many years, as I told it I suddenly recognised the visual world of the story, it was my Grandparent's home, with its brass kettles, long wooden table and settle. I had unconsciously visualised the story there, and hadn't even realised it. This complex inter-relationship between the real and the imagined is central to the process of visualisation. The synthesis of personal and communal imagination conjuring the story and giving it meaning.

#### EPICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Nomadism and stories led me to Central Asia. Since 1994 I have worked along-side Central Asian bards who have visited the UK, and made several trips to Central Asia as performer and researcher. My most recent trips were to Kyrgyzstan in 2001 and 2002.

I met Kyrgyz *Manaschis* Urkash Mambetaliev, Qabar Atabekov and Asan Ullu Tilek during 2001. Our exchanges were reciprocal dialogues, growing out of a mutual interest in each others' experiences. In sharing their work I wanted their voices to be heard, but am aware that I have made the choices about arranging the material of our dialogues. My own experiences of listening and telling have orientated these choices. However these same experiences were also our meeting point. We bridged the spaces between us through a common commitment to the performance space. Even though we understand performance differently, we recognised and appreciated each others experience. This powerful link created a desire to share and exchange ideas about storytelling.

Central Asia is a repository for some of the most elaborate epics in the world. Until a hundred years ago much of Central Asia was populated by nomadic societies with strong storytelling traditions. Performances were linked to patterns of nomadism and bards fulfilled spiritual roles. Epics were sung: to bless camping grounds; encourage warrior deeds; give protection; connect to ancestral history and affirm continuation of the clan. The content of the epics and the storytellers' role has adapted with the changing political and social situations Central Asia has faced. Epics have been used to create and re-create national identity. Paradoxically this process of adaptation has kept traditions alive. Despite deprivation and upheavals, oral performance remains an important cultural expression, and in many ways it is stories that have held communities together.

#### MANAS

The *Manas* epic is named after the hero Manas. It is vast, over 2 million verses have been collected so far, and it would take weeks to tell. Manas is a miracle child born to old parents and marked by strength. At 13 he kills enemies, at 15 he rules a band of warriors. He battles with the Kalmucks and the Chinese. Marries the bold Kaniky. Dies in combat and is replaced by his son Semety and grandson Sejteck. The epic contains many genres of stories: legends; romances; histories and myths depicting pre-Islamic Gods, inter-tribal relations and old shamanistic beliefs.

*Manas* is performed mainly, but not exclusively, by men. I heard adults and children performing in: *yurts*; apartment blocks; farms; schools; on television and in

concert halls. I found no formal situation was necessary to tell *Manas*. Everyone loves the story, they feel it belongs to them and they belong to it, so *Manas* is told when anyone asks.

*Manaschi* Urkash Mambetaliev was born in 1935. He lives in Bishkek and is famous throughout Kyrgyzstan and has travelled internationally. I visited his apartment on the 14th floor of one of the densely populated tower housing complexes built during the Soviet era. As there is little housing available almost everyone lives in these dilapidated buildings. Inside the apartments many people live in *yurt* style, each room adapted to circumstance, bedding unrolled and tables stowed away as needed.

Late that night, to a small family group, Urkash told a dramatic section of the epic: "The Great Campaign". It describes how *Manas* journeys to China. He meets, fights and defeats his enemy the Chinese warrior Konurbaj. The section ends with *Manas'* triumphal entry into the capital.

Before the performance Urkash said he would have to restrain his voice because he did not want to disturb his neighbours. He gave a powerful performance which built in intensity and emotion, quite forgetting the neighbours. He used diction precisely, emphasising consonants, elongating vowels, stressing the ends of words. He delineated character through tone and emotion, using gestures to illustrate actions and feelings. He emphasised rhythm and pace, beating his hand, or swaying his arms. He sometimes closed his eyes, sometimes gazed into space, sometimes made eye contact, especially when an audience member had been touched by the story.

#### LANGUAGE AND MEMORY

*Manas* is chanted to a variety of melodic patterns following a flexible syllabic meter of 7, 8 or 9 syllables per line. Performers use a range of speech genres. Arthur Hatto (1989) analysed *Manas* in detail, categorising: stock phrases; epithets; dialogue; description; refrains, and motifs. Some of these speech patterns are memorised, some improvised, some composed. Karl Reichl (1992) detailed how Turkic languages lend themselves to: rhyme making; repetition; parallelism; alliteration, and assonance (Reichl 1992:179).

*Manas* exists as both a written and performed text, the earliest transcriptions date from the mid-1800's (Valikhanov and Radloff). Daniel Prior's (2000) documentation of the written versions of *Manas* brings up the contested question of the age of *Manas*, provoking discussion about its origins and methods of transmission. However oral and literary modes are interconnected in Central Asia. Memorisation, narration and transcription are linked processes leading to multiple versions of stories (Bodrogligeti 94:10). Urkash is writing down his version of *Manas*, and Tilek's dream is to do the same.

But *Manas* is essentially a performance, and must be spoken aloud. The formulaic language patterns are flexible to personal interpretation. And it is through performance that the *Manaschis* make their own versions, weaving philosophy and poetry into the existing forms according to their talent. However much of the *Manas* vocabulary is no longer part of everyday Kyrgyz speech, and Urkash said *Manaschi*, "need to have knowledge of literary language."

#### NARRATIVE

Different sections of *Manas* have been popular at different times, expanding and contracting accordingly. Choice of what to perform depends on an audience's desires, which itself reflects common repertoires, current concerns, and the requirements of the present patron.

The section Urkash chose to tell was one of his favourites. It was also popular. I had already heard it performed by Qabar Atabekov, a venerable *Manaschi* born in 1926. He gave a performance in a *yurt* on the shores of Lake Issik Kul. Children and adults listened intensely, many wiping tears from their eyes. The battle with Konurbaj echoed their own history of losses and struggles. Through their imagination they identified with the hero, tested themselves against challenges, experimented with different roles, faced sorrows, and satisfied desires.

Each *Manaschi* performed the same section in distinct and personal ways. They made their own creative choices about language and plot. Translations of these performances are underway, which will reveal more of their individual interpretations and the correspondences between plot, language and performance.

#### PERFORMANCE ENERGIES

However the *Manaschis* imparted something to me besides language and plot. They communicated images, feelings, atmospheres and energies. Urkash's storytelling surpassed the boundaries of language, communicating strong images despite our language differences. When I described my enjoyment, Urkash remarked, "foreigners have frequently told me they can see the story, even though they don't understand it."

The *Manaschis* have dynamic physical and vocal presences. They use their voices like instruments, playing with: volume; tone; diction; stress; and rhythm. Urkash said one of the most important qualities for the *Manaschi* was, "a strong and powerful voice." The guttural sound is demanding vocally especially when performing for hours. I saw many children performing *Manas*, and a major consideration about whether they would go on to be "true" *Manaschis* was the potential of their voice.

*Manaschi* sit to perform, but their bodies are alive with gestures. Illustrative gestures tell the story, while rhythmic, stylised gestures carry the pace. Schechner terms such stylised gestures "restored behaviour" (Schechner 37:85), and like the formulaic language, they exist independently of the performer and are part of the inherited repertoire. Children imitate these stylised gestures along with the guttural vocal sounds. This physical vocabulary creates a space for images to appear. The vibration of the voice, the precise attention to its use, gestural expressions, and the emotional relationship with the story, charge the performance space with energy.

Urkash described how this happens. "At the start of my performance, for the first five minutes, I see the public, then they disappear ... then I see it [the story] in

*E.L.O. 9-10 (2003-4)*

my 'eyes', its like I'm inside the war. I don't see the people any more." His intense visualisation filled the room. Urkash said, "the teller needs to say it like he dreamed it."

In other words, it must seem real. He added, "Every time I tell, I feel the same emotions as if I was telling it for the first time."

ENTERING THE STORY

Through visualisation the world of the story becomes real. Asan Ulu Tilek is a talented *Manaschi* born near Karakol. He was 17 when he visited the UK in 2001. I was asked to present a synopsis of his performance in English. He told the popular section "Ty Toro and Kaniky". The widowed Kaniky enters Manas' horse, Ty Toro, into a horse-race. Ty Toro falls behind 300 other riders. Kaniky prays to Manas, whose spirit appears. Manas and Kaniky converse and she weeps, then Manas spurs the horse on to the winning post.

Tilek performed in London to a large audience of both Kyrgyz and English. His presence was intense and the audience were swept into the story whether they spoke Kyrgyz or not. His strong gestures meant everyone followed the narrative. As the performance progressed he clapped his hands, punctuating the ends of phrases, and the rhythm and volume of his voice increased. At the end of the section, a Kyrgyz musician reached out and touched Tilek on his knee, and Tilek stopped telling.

After Tilek's performance Kyrgyz friends said, "such talent is a gift from God". Later I asked Tilek why the musician had touched him. Tilek said, "if he had not touched me I would have just carried on telling to the end of the epic. I am running with Manas, I am no longer here, I am in the streets running with him."

The *Manaschi's* visualisation is so powerful he actually enters the world of the story, and it is hard to come back. The teller's relationship with their character seems to be at the heart of this experience. By embodying the story the teller makes the hero appear. This experience is beyond language and can be felt by everyone. Urkash said, "you forget the words and you are it. The soul of Manas stands with you and helps you tell. You see it in your mind."

For the teller, conjuring Manas is the meaning of being a *Manaschi*. Through the performance, and in the liminal space of the imagination (Schechner 295:85), the hero appears as muse and guide. Urkash said, "My strength is in the spirit of Manas. Sometimes I don't eat or sleep and I don't get hungry, I am with the spirit of Manas, he protects me and feeds me." Belief in the reality of the story is paramount for this transformative act to occur and requires a deep relationship with the story and its characters.

CALLING

Urkash described how "I didn't choose, I was chosen by storytelling." He was educated by his Grandmother who told him stories. As young boy he started to tell

*Manas* and people were amazed at his talent. "When I was 11 I got the blessing from the elders to tell and they set about finding me the best teacher."

Tilek described walking in the mountains as boy telling *Manas* for hours. "I used to get a pressure in my head and the only way I could relieve it was by telling *Manas*. I listened to tellers live, on TV and radio, whenever I could."

Qabar described how he dreamt about *Manas* as a young boy. He woke up afraid and told his parents he didn't want to tell *Manas*. "I was too shy to tell in public...When I was 9 I was climbing a mountain telling *Manas*, and I couldn't stop. I kept on telling. A shepherd started listening and forgot his sheep and lost them. The shepherd told the village about my talent and I began telling *Manas* without shame. *Manas* helps me."

Reichl discusses this classic path to becoming a bard. The "dream or vision" invests the bard with "authority" (Reichl 140:2000). These cultural expectations are ancient, yet are still meaningful in Kyrgyzstan today, continuing under different circumstances. But as Urkash said, "very few people get this calling." *Manaschi* seem to have a predisposition for storytelling and their strong inner life finds expression through performance.

The *Manaschi's* authority is reflected in audiences' attitudes. Urkash said, "people believe it is a gift from God and want something from a famous *Manaschi*." Audience members imbue themselves with a *Manaschi's* power by drinking the drops of tea left in a *Manaschi's* cup. Urkash often finds his shirt buttons missing after a performance. "There is even a tradition where I am asked to spit in the mouth of a new born child to give them protection. I refuse to do this!" he laughed.

The *Manaschi* has responsibilities beyond being a talented performer. For Urkash it is impossible to be a true *Manaschi* without upholding these responsibilities. "You need moral qualities: not to lie; to have a clean, open heart. You must never refuse to tell *Manas*, or teach someone, even if it is to teach a small boy. It is your duty to pass it on."

#### CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS

Traditionally performances lasted from sunset to sunrise, continuing the following night from the point where the *Manaschi* stopped. The "power of repetition and accumulation" (Schechner 11:85) leading to altered states of consciousness. Hours of storytelling intensify visualisation, the repetitive vocal rhythm creating trance-like states in participants. "Selective inattention" (Schechner 202:88) occurs during long performances, domestic tasks and greetings become part of the performance itself, adding to the communal experience of listening.

However contemporary performance contexts are different. Concert programmes require short performances. Urkash described the effects of this. "It is a big problem, storytelling is like riding a horse, you have to let it run and it gets better...you are invited to perform for 3 minutes, but its impossible to cut a performance in the middle." Urkash compromises creatively to these new situations, adapting his performance and preparation process. "As there is no alternative I train at home so I can exactly fill this time frame." But it is frustrating, the transformative state of the performance cannot be attained in 3 minutes. The media are the latest patrons bringing new requirements. Urkash described how,

### *E.L.O. 9-10 (2003-4)*

“TV companies complain I tell with my eyes shut...it is not good for TV. But I have to close my eyes and see it [the story] as a movie.”

Despite these shifts in emphasis, peoples' love of *Manas* continues as they create their own performance situations. During Tilek's visit to the UK some Kyrgyz friends arranged a *Manas* sleep-over. Tilek told *Manas* and the London audience listened into the early hours.

#### COMMUNAL IMAGINATION

Through the story listeners are connected with a communal imagination. The Kyrgyz landscape reverberates with places where stories are located. Talas is where *Manas* was believed to have been born and buried. Old tracks, lakes and hills carry legends linked to *Manas*. New roads, buildings and businesses bear characters' names. Felt textiles, embroidered coats and the traditional *kalpak* (man's hat), which *Manas* himself wears, carry designs of animals and deities linked to *Manas*. Contemporary objects such as bread-boards, tea-caddies and paintings depict images from the epic.

*Manas* has always been used to shape communal imagination, from strengthening tribal identity to upholding the Soviet state. Daniel Prior documented the historical “interplay between bards and patrons” (Prior 39:2000) on the evolving form of the epic. This process continues, the current government using *Manas* to redefine Kyrgyz nationality, from the 1995 UNESCO sponsored “*Manas 1000*” festival, to the creation of the “*Seven precepts of Manas*” taught as moral codes in schools and incorporated by President Akayev in his 10th Independence Day speech in 2001.

The dialogue with *Manas* continues in this wider performative space. Visualisation of the story is a conscious and unconscious process, influenced by private and public experience. The real and imagined, personal and communal, combining to re-inforce the truth of the epic.

#### TELLING THE IMAGES

Telling the images, rather than remembering words, is central to a *Manaschi's* performance. Images are remembered and communicated through the physicality of the performance itself. The emotional truth of the images embodied by the teller and made real through a living relationship with the hero *Manas*. The real world of the story is sustained by the communal meanings the epic has in the imagination of the audience and for the whole Kyrgyz nation.

Multiple layers of reality co-exist within the boundaries of the performance. The *Manaschi* is mediator of this space, weaving story between teller and listener, making it appear in the space of the imagination, re-affirming its values in the spaces of the community. But imagination is boundless, and through visualisation, the *Manaschi* is able to transform the performance space, connecting past with present, while transporting participants outside history and time. Urkash, Tilek and Qabar are committed to rejuvenating their traditions and their work represents an inspiration to storytellers everywhere.

Sally Pomme Clayton, Telling the Images

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RESUMO

Criar imagens é central na experiência de contar histórias. Este artigo considera modos como as imagens se tornam presentes quando as histórias são contadas. Discutem-se experiências de visualização com os *Manaschis* do Quirguizistão que narram a épica *Manas*. O processo de visualização durante as recitações parece estar relacionado com o descrever imagens mais do que com o lembrar palavras. O acto físico de encarnar a história no espaço da recitação conjura a história, transportando dentro dela os *Manaschis* contidos na épica. A imaginação da audiência e da comunidade mais vasta combinam-se para fazerem com que Manas, o herói, apareça.

*ABSTRACT*

Creating images is central to the experience of storytelling. This paper looks at the ways in which images become present when stories are told. Experiences of visualisation are discussed with *Manaschis* from Kyrgyzstan who tell the epic *Manas*. The process of visualising during their performances seems to be connected to telling the images rather than remembering the words. The physical act of embodying the story in the performance space conjures the story, transporting the *Manaschis* inside the epic. The imagination of the audience and the larger community combine to actually make Manas, the hero, appear.

