

International Partnership Programme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
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Case study report: Kyrgyz Republic
National Project on Safeguarding of the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers

National Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic for UNESCO

1. Introduction

The art of akyns, Kyrgyz epic tellers, was proclaimed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. Being highly endangered due to, among other reasons, loss of interest on the part of young people and lack of funding, the Kyrgyz National Commission for UNESCO and the experts from WPE (“World’s Peoples’ Eposes” NGO) developed a national Action Plan to safeguard this ancient tradition. Its main objective, and hence the core activity, is the fostering of the process of transmission of the art of akyns from the older generation to the young one. For this purpose, a network of youth study centres (henceforth referred to as “Studios”) have been established in various regions of Kyrgyzstan, providing an appropriate framework for the traditional “master-apprentice” way of transmission. The other activities of the project (training, akyn contests, publications, etc.) contribute to the transmission process through improved archiving, recording and promotion of the Kyrgyz oral traditions, and in particular, the *Manas* epic.

“Manas” is one of the world’s longest epic poems (some versions have about a million lines of poetry) and is of immense importance to Kyrgyz cultural heritage and identity. Even though its textualisation started in late 19th century, its continuity as living oral heritage has so far been uninterrupted. “Manas” is still performed in public (even though less and less frequently) and there are still some young people who (often after having had a visionary dream) wish to learn the complex and beautiful art of Manas-telling and become an akyn.

Traditionally, the three main types of oral poetry performed by Kyrgyz akyns are:

- the epic trilogy: “Manas”, “Semetey”, “Seitek” (the performers are called *manaschy* or *semeteichy*);
- shorter epic poems called “dastans” (such as *Kojojash*, *Er Toshtuk*, *Kurmanbek*, *Sarinji-Bokoi*, *Er Tabyldy*, *Janysh-Bayish* and many others; the performers are called *dastanchy*);
- oral folk songs

The Kyrgyz epics are intrinsically linked with the art of akyns: each epic poem is associated with a certain akyn and his/her particular manner of performance, and vice versa, each akyn is associated with a specific repertoire. Akyns are both the bearers and the creators of the Kyrgyz oral poetry. Indeed, the best akyn-manaschies are the ones who improvise at each performance while keeping to the same plotline. Of special interest is *aitysh* – a traditional competition of two akyns-improvisers. Aitysh usually takes place before a big audience and is a good school for developing and perfecting the art of akyns.

It is expected that, as a result of this project, a renewed interest will arise in *Manas* and in epic-telling among Kyrgyz public. This will eventually lead to a country-wide revival of the akyn tradition, implying also greater prestige and better prospects for those who choose epic-telling as their life’s vocation.

2. Objectives of the project:

The long-term objective of this project is the safeguarding of the art of Kyrgyz akyns. The project also lays the basis for the development of a national policy and such programmes as the “Living Human Treasures”, the national inventory of the intangible cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan.

The mid-term objectives of the project are:

- To increase the awareness and knowledge by the general public of the content of the *Manas* epic, this is crucial to the revival of interest in the art of akyns;
- To encourage the “horizontal” (from smaller to larger audiences) transmission of knowledge and interest in the art of akyns, through publications, contests and other promotional activities;
- To support the “vertical” (inter-generational) transmission of the knowledge, experience, skills and technique of the Kyrgyz akyns through 8 studios to be opened in various regions of Kyrgyzstan;
- To build local and national capacities for the safeguarding and transmission of the art of akyns, through organisation of relevant training workshops and scholarly conferences.

3. Methods of project implementation:

Traditionally, each Kyrgyz akyn was a tutor/teacher for his students and followers, and his followers in their turn became teachers of next generations of students. Thus, the art of akyns was transmitted orally and perfected through the “mechanism” of akyns’ tutorship. This mechanism being crucial to the safeguarding and transmission of the art of akyns, the main activity of this project is the opening and running of youth study centres (Studios), where transmission of the oral tradition will take place from the older to young akyns.

In 2006, 8 studios were opened in different regions of Kyrgyzstan, in coordination with the Ministry of Culture, local authorities and NGOs. Special agreements had been negotiated with the municipalities of the regions concerned to use the premises of local Cultural Centers free of charge. Recognised akyns living in the area were selected by the Steering Committee to become tutors for young akyns (one tutor per Studio). According to the plan of action of the project, a Steering Committee was established, which includes performers (recognized akyns), scholars and government representatives. The role of the Steering Committee is to monitor project implementation and provision of assistance to school-studios in their work.

In the framework of the project were organised the training course on “Textualisation, digitisation and archiving of epic heritage”, the International conference on “Epic Poetry and its Safeguarding”. Concert tours in different regions of Kyrgyzstan were organised to popularize the *Manas* epic and akyns tradition. In addition, in all school studios a competition among students was organised. These contests serve to identify talented young akyns and to provide them with an opportunity to get accustomed to performing in public. The contests will also help revitalise the tradition of akyn competitions. Throughout this activity, audio-visual recordings were made. They will be disseminated in the form of CD-ROMs and DVD at a later stage, to promote the art of akyns among various audiences.

4. Conclusion

As the result of this project, a renewed interest has arisen in “*Manas*” and in epic-telling among Kyrgyz public. This will eventually lead to a country-wide revival of the akyn

tradition, implying also better prospects for those who choose epic-telling as their life's vocation. Activities implemented during the project helped to increase the awareness and knowledge by the general public of the content of the "Manas" epic, which is crucial to the revival of interest in the art of akyns. Promotional activities encouraged the "horizontal" (from smaller to larger audiences) transmission of knowledge and interest in the art of akyns. They support the "vertical" (inter-generational) transmission of the knowledge, experience, skills and technique of the Kyrgyz akyns through school-studios in various regions of Kyrgyzstan. Local and national capacities for the safeguarding and transmission of the art of akyns have developed, through organisation of trainings and scholarly conferences during implementation of the project.