Introduction: on studying stories of peoplehood

Oh, oh, oh, the ancient fairy tale
It is high time to begin it.
The Fairy tale of the olden times
It is just time to remember it.
Opening lines of the Kyrgyz Manas Epos

Manas and Moses

The Republic of Kyrgyzstan, also termed the Kyrgyz Republic, came into existence after a coup ended the former Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan on August 31, 1991. In the year 2002, the Republic maintained an official website linked to a 1992 Decree by Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev. He declared that 1995 would be "a year of national celebration of the millennium of the Kyrgyz heroic epos Manas." Akayev also urged various governmental ministries to submit projects "on the revival of the age-old values and material and spiritual heritage of the Kyrgyz people connected with the epos Manas." Those projects included organizing a single "scientific-propaganda coordinating center in the Republic in order to unite the means of mass media, science, culture and education for restoring the objective historical truth about the Kyrgyz and their historical memory."[1]

This website is revealing on several levels. From academic and cultural viewpoints, reviving and celebrating the epos Manas was a highly commendable act. Twenty times longer than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, the epos details the history of the Kyrgyz people from ancient times until the eighteenth century. Many regard it as an irreplaceable source of Kyrgyz history, philosophy, ethnography, and spirituality.

Yet in issuing his decree, President Akayev surely aimed at more than a major cultural or intellectual contribution. The Manas narrative had

[1] In the year 2002 the website was located at http://freenet.bishkek.su/kyrgyzstan.

obvious *political* appeal to the government of a newly independent republic. It relates the heroic feats of the legendary dragon-slaying Kyrgyz hero Manas, who led his people in ancient times through struggles for national independence against foreign invaders. The epos then pursues Kyrgyz history through the lives and deeds of Manas's son, Semetey, and his grandson, Seitek, forebears of the modern Kyrgyz nation. In propagating this epos via various governmental means, President Akayev was not only seeking to promote an artistic masterpiece. He was also seeking to institutionalize a post-Soviet vision of the modern Kyrgyz Republic in his constituents' lives, by presenting the new Republic as the appropriate heir of the grand traditions the Manas epos embodies. And he sought to achieve this strengthening, in turn, by using the epos to reinforce the sense of the Kyrgyz that they *are* a people, and a people that deserves to feel proud of its historical, cultural, and political identity, properly understood.[2]

These political goals are suggested not only by how promptly Akayev chose to decree elaborate celebrations of the Manas, only months after the 1991 coup that ended Soviet rule. It is shown also by his championing of governmental coordination of all major "scientific-propaganda" information sources. He sought to insure that they assisted in presenting the "age-old values" of the Kyrgyz people in ways that accorded with what the government regards as "objective historical truth." It might seem surprising that the leader of a newly independent nation would turn so quickly and publicly to such a cultural project and take such a centralized, potentially authoritarian approach to doing so. Yet on reflection, it is understandable why a new regime's leaders would wish its constituents to see themselves as one people and as a rightly proud, independent people. It is also clear why leaders would wish their constituents to identify the new regime with that people's most ancient and glorious values and achievements. And it is clear, as well, why leaders might wish to exercise considerable control over the understanding of their political identity and obligations to which their constituents are exposed.

However understandable, that last aspect of Akayev's efforts may be cause for concern. Governmental deployment of a nation's historical resources raises fears of state-sponsored, chauvinistic indoctrination via

[2] Breuilly, 1982, 346–348, cites similar Afrikaner, Czech, and Italian examples of ceremonial celebrations of earlier events displaying "heroic resistance to aliens" which sought to inspire a people to "return to the heights of the past, though in a transformed fashion." In these cases "Afrikaner," "Czech," and "Italian" identities were all reinforced, if not substantially constituted, by celebrations of the actions of predecessors who would not have defined their peoplehood in those terms. In one form or another, such political ceremonies are, I believe, ubiquitous.

distortion and manipulation of cultural artifacts. Kyrgyzstan is a country with 4.7 million people who belong to some eighty ethnic groups, and it classifies only 58 per cent of its citizens as ethnically Kyrgyz, though all are officially members of the "Kyrgyz people." It is hard to imagine that all the non-Kyrgyz ethnic group members identify themselves fully with the Manas epos, with the new regime that is celebrating it, and indeed with the "Kyrgyz people" – though doubtless President Akayev hoped that through these efforts many would come to do so.

This promotion of a certain vision of Kyrgyz political community has taken place, moreover, in a world where international attention to chauvinistic political projects cannot easily be avoided. Hence the government's globally accessible English-language website walks a tightrope. Perhaps extravagantly, it proclaims the epos "the unique masterpiece of the world cultural treasury." But it explicitly distances the Manas epos from narrow nationalism, even while it affirms popular self-determination within particular nations or peoples. In regard to the international realm, it assures us that "Each nation makes its own contribution to the world cultural treasury according to the peculiarities and richness of its talents and creative abilities." Domestically, it asserts that the main principle the Kyrgyz people employ in governing their ethnic pluralism is that "Kyrgyzstan is our common house," and that their Republic "firmly upholds the equality of all communities" within that house. Those beyond its walls are assured that the Manas "epos sings the values which are common for all people: social justice, honesty, dignity, humanism, care for people." Yet these universal values include particularistic attachments: the Kyrgyz webmasters next list "love for homeland, for national traditions and customs" as sentiments exalted in the Manas. They end by summarizing these promises of harmoniously blended nationalism and humanitarianism, assigning to the epos the espousal of "respect for human rights" along with the promotion of "national unity and tolerance, peaceful coexistence with neighbouring states, people's aspirations and hopes for the better future."

Further suggesting Kyrgyz awareness of world opinion, the site also contains a link to a supportive Resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations. The Resolution presents the Manas epos as "not only the source of Kyrgyz language and literature but also the basis of cultural, moral, historical, social and religious traditions of the Kyrgyz people." Lest that sound a bit parochial, the UN document adds, "this epos favors the dissemination of humane ideals and value of the humanity." The Resolution goes on to stress "the liberal heritage of this epos for the peoples of the region." Hence it enjoins UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) to cooperate and

assist in celebrating and disseminating knowledge about the epos Manas in 1995 and thereafter.

By most accounts, Akayev's 1992 Manas initiative did spur fresh attention to this cultural work, and favorable responses to such measures contributed to Kyrgyzstan's reputation in the early 1990s as "a showcase of the Central Asian democratic experience." President Akayev has, however, since been criticized for undemocratic measures. His government has raided, threatened, and in some cases shut down independent media; disqualified political opponents from participating in elections; temporarily revoked the registration of the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights; and arrested ethnic Uzbek citizens suspected of belonging to "extremist" Islamic groups, a practice that drew sharp criticisms prior to September 11, 2001. Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Court also permitted Akayev to win a constitutionally questionable third five-year term in October, 2000.[3] When in March 2002 Kyrgyz police shot demonstrators protesting against the jailing of an opposition lawmaker, Akayev did compel his cabinet to resign, saying that "Kyrgyz society is right when it refuses to forgive the authorities . . . for violations of human rights and infringements of democratic freedoms"; but he did not himself resign.[4] Thus, though his celebration of the "humane" and "liberal" Manas epos may indeed have aided Akayev's efforts to win domestic and international support for the new Kyrgyz regime, it has not prevented him from authorizing some quite illiberal measures. Neither, however, does he seem to view his government's frequent invocations of the Manas, and his ongoing protestations of support for democracy and human rights, as superfluous.

This recent episode in the long and politically contested history of an extraordinary epic work, and of modern Asian politics, serves to dramatize the empirical and normative phenomena this book will probe: the generation, maintenance, and transformation of senses of political peoplehood. It may be rare for governments to sponsor a narrative of national identity conducive to their authority over their predecessors and potential rivals quite as explicitly as President Akayev did in 1992 and thereafter. Yet, I will argue, political leaders necessarily engage in such "people-forming" or "people-building" endeavors to a greater or lesser degree all the time, inevitably deploying inherited materials of the sort the Manas epos strikingly exemplifies. In fact, leaders routinely propagate

[3] Sergei Glabo, "Politics-Kyrgyzstan: President's Victory a No-Win for Democracy," Inter Press Service, http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/Oct00/07_26_014.html, Oct. 31, 2000; Amnesty International, "Annual Report 2000-Kyrgyzstan," http://www.web.amnesty.org/web/ar2000. See also "Amnesty International Report 2001: Kyrgystan," AI Index: POL 10/001/2001, ISBN: 0862102995, www.amnesty.org.

[4] *The New York Times on the Web*, May 22, 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/apoline/inter . . . /AP-Kyrgyzstan-Government-Quits.

and institutionalize particular visions of their political communities in broad-ranging ways that do far more both to win and to distribute status, power, and resources among some people and not others than Akayev's more symbolic promotion of the singing of the Manas. His actions thus comprise one of the more colorful, yet far from the weightiest, examples of the fundamental and pervasive role that stories of peoplehood play in political life.

It is a role that, I believe, they have always played, everywhere in our world and throughout recorded human history. Two distinguished archaeologists, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman, have recently argued that in the seventh century BC, King Josiah of Judah undertook actions that seem not unlike those of President Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, under not wholly dissimilar circumstances. Archaeological evidence suggests that Judah, long overshadowed by its northern counterpart, the separate kingdom of Israel, had grown rapidly after Israel's conquest by Assyria in 720 BC. When the Assyrian empire eventually began to decline, opportunities arose for King Josiah, who came to the throne in 639 BC and reigned for thirty years (Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, 229–282).

Josiah's government sought to win support for throwing off all foreign domination and building a new nation that would encompass both Judah and Israel, if not more. To help achieve these ends, an expanded cohort of professional priests and scribes in Judah's holy city of Jerusalem greatly revised and combined various historical and religious traditions to create five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, known as the Pentateuch, the Torah, or the books of Moses. They culminate in Moses's death just before his people finally enter their promised land. The Pentateuch's magnificent narratives define the history, cosmic significance, laws, and divine mission of what they present as "the people of Israel." Yet that history features Judah over and over again – as the burial place of the ancient Jewish patriarchs, including "the most Judean of patriarchs – Abraham"; as populated by the descendants of the son blessed by Jacob as ruler over all the tribes of Israel; as the place where the idolatrous Canaanites were most fully conquered; as the home of the gloriously successful king David; as far greater than the northern kingdom of Israel and more faithful throughout most of history to the original covenant with Abraham in which both kingdoms shared. In the seventh century, Finkelstein and Silberman argue, the laws and mission conveyed by these books strongly indicated that all participants in that covenant should be politically united and religiously devoted exclusively to the one God of Israel, whose worship centered in Judah's Temple of Jerusalem (Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, 23, 44, 229–230).

Yet, they maintain, modern archaeology shows it to be far more likely that David was in fact a minor ruler of a Judah that was a mere "marginal, isolated, rural region"; that up until its conquest by Assyria, the northern kingdom of Israel was far wealthier, more populated, and more historically significant than Judah; that neither monotheism nor Jerusalem had ever been so central to religious practices in either Judah or Israel as the government of King Josiah and their Pentateuch insisted; and that few in either Judah or Israel felt any strong religious or political imperative to achieve unification as one political people prior to Josiah's ambitious pursuit of that goal. Finkelstein and Silberman believe that the Pentateuch reinterprets and invents characters, events, and struggles in ways that systematically valorize Josiah (by celebrating Joshua, especially); stigmatize Judah's rivals (the opposing kingdoms of Moab and Ammon are said to be populated by the children of incest); and most of all, urge the political unification of Israel and Judah and the embrace of a common religion centered in Jerusalem, in a manner that served King Josiah's key political goals. The result was a set of literary texts, written when literacy had recently become more widespread in the region, that "dramatically changed what it meant to be an Israelite." This new sense of communal identity not only helped to consolidate Josiah's rule within Judah. It also strengthened popular will to face international threats, and it helped "prove to the native residents of the northern highlands that they were indeed part of the great people of Israel who fought together with the people of Judah to inherit their Promised Land" (Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, 14, 40, 95, 229–249, 275–283).

The claims of Finkelstein and Silberman are controversial. Though also seeing Josiah as "instituting a sweeping religious reform" that buttressed "Judah's independence and his own religious authority by rigorously restricting sacrificial rites to Jersusalem," historian Raymond Scheindlin, for example, contends that it was "Judean elders in Babylonia" under the Persian empire who created the Torah, compiling an "official national history and codification of laws, customs, and religious practices, enabling them to reorganize the national identity around religious behavior and to some extent to turn the national identity itself into a religion." They did so, on his account, precisely to sustain a sense of "peoplehood" or common identity after the Babylonian conquest in 587 BC, and the subsequent heightened dispersal of Jews, had deprived them of "a common political framework, a common language," and "national institutions."[5]

[5] Scheindlin contends that it "is from this period that it becomes appropriate to begin speaking of the Jewish people, meaning all those who, throughout history and around the globe, have regarded themselves as linked to one another and to the people of the ancient Israelite kingdom, either by ethnicity, culture, intellectual heritage, or religion" (1998, 27).

This adaptation of Jewish political identity into a form less threatening to the ruling Persians took hold in part because it received active Persian support. It was, indeed, under the authority of the Persian emperor that "the Torah was first officially read in public and promulgated as the law of the province of Judea" itself (Tadmor, 1976, 160; Scheindlin, 1998, 27–32).

It is beyond my scope to try to assess these conflicting accounts of the compilation of the books of Moses.[6] But whatever their origins, it is undeniable that the books portray the formation of a distinct people, and that they have frequently been invoked since by a great variety of leading Jewish figures to foster senses of common political as well as religious identities, purposes, and destinies. It seems likely, then, that the scribes, priests, and other officials of seventh-century Judah, the late sixth- or fifth-century Jewish leaders in Babylonia, and certainly subsequent leaders, have engaged in efforts very similar to modern Kyrgyzstan's promotion of the epos Manas. They, too, have invoked and reinterpreted cultural traditions, often with great artistry, in ways that have helped sustain a sense of shared Jewish peoplehood through many centuries of hardship and often intensely violent struggle that continue today. They also furnished inspirational motifs that would later be woven into many other stories of peoplehood. Just as King Josiah's men may well have transformed a variety of traditions to create their vision of a unified, monotheistic Israel, later political writers would draw upon their work for many different, often surprising purposes.

Finkelstein and Silberman read the book of Judges, for example, as structured during King Josiah's reign to deliver the moral that Israel had been trapped in a cycle of sin and retribution until a redemptive monarchy came to be established (2001, 120). Some 2,300 years later, in 1776, Thomas Paine's classic revolutionary pamphlet "Common Sense" interpreted the ensuing books of Samuel to argue instead that Israel at its greatest had been a republic, and that it had sinned when it turned to monarchy (Jensen, ed., 1967, 410–413). In so doing, Paine drew on deeply entrenched Protestant senses of identity held by colonial British Americans to help inspire their allegiance to the emerging vision of a new, republican nation, the United States of America – for his comparison suggested that the new American nation was, like the ancient Israelites, a "chosen people."[7] Paine was thus engaged in the same sort

[6] For a thorough overview of recent debates over ancient Israelite historiography, including the views of "minimalists" who doubt the existence of David and Solomon at all, see Long, ed., 1999. Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, give the archaeological bases for their disagreements with these still more skeptical views at 128–130.

[7] As a further indication of the wide impact of Israeli people-making, Don Baker notes that many Christian South Koreans today claim this "new Israel," "chosen people" status for themselves (Baker, 1998, 124).

of "people-forming" political endeavor undertaken by Josiah's scribes in the Finkelstein and Silberman account, and by the modern Kyrgyz officials championing the Manas. Doubtless in the course of its long and changing history, the Manas epos, like the Bible, has been interpreted to support political causes just as contrasting as theocratic monarchism and commercial republicanism.

Despite their similarities, however, when read as an innovative seventh-century story of Israeli peoplehood, the Pentateuch and the ensuing books of the prophets in the Bible do stand in contrast to the Manas epos, as presented on the Kyrgyz website, in at least one regard. Though Israel is depicted as in a certain sense a redemptive nation for all humanity, and though a charitable spirit toward outsiders is encouraged, the biblical account of Israeli peoplehood is not crafted to win the approval of foreign observers. Neither does it promise respectful acceptance of diverse religious and ethnic communities within a united Israel. The international and domestic political challenges Josiah faced instead seem to have prompted a strong assertion of Israel's expansionist destiny and a rejection of what were seen as sinful rival cults within the unified nation Josiah sought to build and lead.

Those contrasts suggest that, though the adaptation of cultural and religious traditions for political purposes may be an enduring feature of human life from the time of King Josiah to President Akayev, some things have changed. In many ways, modern economic and technological circumstances and prevalent modern moral traditions work against the open promulgation of senses of peoplehood that can support harsh treatment of both outsiders and insiders who are deemed too "other" by those in power. The questions of whether modern religions, science, technologies, and economics have permanently shifted the politics of people-making in more cosmopolitan, less particularistic directions – or if not, whether they can do so – are topics that the ensuing pages will recurrently explore, though I do not believe a definitive answer can yet be given. Still, whatever the extent of these changes, the ongoing troubles in the Middle East, conflicts with extremist Islamic groups harbored in many Arab and Asian nations, and ethnoculturally charged clashes in too much of Africa, in the former Yugoslavia, in Northern Ireland, in Chiapas, in the Kashmir, in Colombia, and in many other places in the world today, all indicate that a politics generating virulent particularisms and harsh treatment of disdained outsiders and insiders remains hard to avoid.

That leads us to the issues that are central to this book. Human beings have never successfully pursued any of their many aspirations and endeavors – they have never sustained stable families, built prosperous economies, formed organizations for spiritual fulfillment, constructed

great buildings and monuments, created enduring works of art, made great scientific and philosophic achievements – without being organized into particular political peoples. These peoples have come in an ever-changing variety of forms, to be sure; but some such political organizations may have always been and may always be essential to human fulfillment and human flourishing. If so, the means by which particular forms of peoplehood are created and maintained are of inestimable human value. Yet, at the same time, the organization of humanity into particular political peoples seems often to be achieved by questionable if not repugnant means and to provide a breeding ground for some of the most bitter human animosities and vicious conduct.

Hence genuinely perplexing issues arise. The dangers of chauvinistic political narratives, xenophobic toward many outsiders and repressive toward many insiders, are so horrific that it is tempting to disdain all governmental crafting of narratives of shared particular political identities as improper exploitations of cultural resources such as the Manas, Israeli religious traditions, and other less formal "stories of peoplehood." Yet this crafting may be unavoidable if we are to sustain vital and deeply cherished political, historical, and cultural traditions and to organize human beings for the productive pursuit of their happiness and welfare. It may, indeed, be one of the tragic dimensions of human life that we can neither do without the political promulgation and institutionalization of "stories of peoplehood" nor can we hope to eradicate entirely their virulent potential.

In any case, we must make choices about how to address this potent dimension of political life. In the electronically interconnected and otherwise "globalized" world of the twenty-first century, should the UN, other international or transnational bodies, other national governments, social groups, and individual citizens play a role in encouraging the sort of political enterprise the Manas millennial celebration represents? If so, must they at the same time somehow seek to insure that such enterprises are genuinely "liberal" and "humanitarian" in their content and consequences? Is this combination even possible? If not, should conscientious groups and individuals simply ignore such worrisome, politically charged activities, in the way we are advised not to look too closely at the making of sausages? Or, as in the case of the production of genuinely toxic foods, should we actively oppose those activities as much as we can?

These are questions that, in one way or another, are being vigorously pressed within many countries and across countries today, for excellent reasons. The forging of enduring, productive forms of political community does seem essential to human flourishing, and for the foreseeable future, at least, these forms must be varied and distinctive. Yet in locales around the globe, that forging continues to occur in white-hot fires

of political conflict involving atrocities that ought to be unimaginable. I believe, however, that precisely because these questions are so painfully immediate in so many contexts, we may need to step back from immersion in specific controversies and seek ways to reflect more generally about the kinds of phenomena we are now confronting. We need to reframe the questions by pursuing something that, somewhat surprisingly, political scientists have not much sought: an explicit general theory of the ways senses of political peoplehood are generated, maintained, and transformed.[8]

The need for a theory of people-building

Internationally, no political development during the second half of the twentieth century was more important than the fall of the Soviet Union and of Communist domination in Eastern Europe, the events that gave birth to the Kyrgyz Republic and many others. Domestically, no political development in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century was more important than the banning of the Jim Crow system of public and private racial hierarchy, followed by other domestic "liberation movements." Both these developments wrought fundamental transformations in existing forms of political membership, status, and identity, and they also set in train further sweeping changes. So, too, did other developments almost as momentous as the end of the Soviet era.

[8] David D. Laitin's *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (1998), which begins with a chapter entitled "A Theory of Political Identities," is the outstanding example of a recent work in political science that approaches such a general theory (even as it also skillfully employs survey data, ethnographic studies, and discourse analysis). Laitin's theory stresses interactions of politically entrepreneurial elites and rational constituents, constrained by contextual conditions, in ways that are generally compatible with the framework I develop here. But to keep his empirical work manageable, he focuses rather strictly on the phenomenon of language assimilation; and theoretically, he is chiefly concerned to elaborate a rational choice "tipping" model. He seeks to delineate circumstances in which it does or does not become rational for individuals to choose to switch languages in sufficient numbers to create a "cascade" that results in effective political identity transformation. Because of his substantive focus on the (undeniably vital) category of language, and even more because of his overriding aim to show the usefulness of models of instrumental rationality, Laitin does not identify or explore different substantive types of "stories of peoplehood" (of which linguistic identity is only one example), as I do here. His acceptance that calculations of identity involve concerns of "status" and "honor" as well as "wealth" interests does provide space for recognizing the role of such stories; and though Laitin focuses on those categories as more behavioral expressions of in-group and out-group acceptance, his discussion of different strains of Russian nationalism shows that the underlying conceptions of group identity do invoke these kinds of stories (Laitin, 1998, 1–35, 300–321, 366). For a critique of Laitin as focusing too narrowly on language and the relatively unfruitful "tipping" model, and for not obtaining empirical results consistent with his theory, see Motyl, 2002, 237–241.