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Echoes of a Storyteller

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Echoes of a Storyteller

Abstract

This is a film review of *Echoes of a Storyteller* (2010).

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This documentary film introduces us to the people of Kyrgyzstan and the epic poem of Manas. The poem follows the life of Manas, who fought to unite forty tribes into one nation. The oral poem presents the history and culture of the Kyrgyz people. It is memorized by Manaschi, storytellers, and has been handed down from generation to generation. Whether Manas really existed or not seems to depend upon to whom you speak. But the poem does capture the history and culture of a people for over one thousand years, even though its origins are wrapped in a sense of mystery.

The Manaschi have prophetic dreams and tell the story of Manas with an enthusiasm and fervor that goes beyond mere recitation. The mentors of those who wish to become Manaschi look closely to see which candidates go beyond mere memorization and recitation. Only those who can recite the poem with heart are considered to be true Manaschi. The search for Manaschi with heart is required because of the spiritual nature of the poem. The Kyrgyz believe that Manas was sent by God to unite the various tribes and to protect the Kyrgyz people. Their faith in Manas is part of what holds the Kyrgyz people together. That faith holds the Kyrgyz together not only as tribes, but as a people facing new political realities and cultural changes. Most of the Kyrgyz are Muslim, so the Manas poem includes elements of Islam. But faith in Manas goes beyond Islam and provides the Kyrgyz with a faith and tradition independent of Islam, even if closely wedded to it.

This is a film that not only introduces us to a little known people and the faith that unites them, but it is a film that raises many of the important questions of religion and culture. Will the Kyrgyz young people maintain the tradition of the Manas? Will the oral tradition be lost? How important is the continued oral recitation of the Manas? How important is the expression of culture and faith to the identity of a people? Will the Kyrgyz or any other group survive the onslaught of global culture? What happens to us as human beings when we lose our unique identity and become like “everyone else”? The film does not raise these and similar questions explicitly, but the viewer cannot but help ask such questions while watching the film.