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Voicing Heritage: Eagle-Hunting, Manas Recitation, and Postcolonial Identity in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract. This paper discusses vocality and its role across contexts and in literature that voices heritage and reaffirms identity. It shows how vocal practices in eagle-hunting and *Manas* recitation mediate relationships between humans and non-humans, ancestors and contemporaries, and colonised and postcolonial identities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The practice of eagle-hunting embodies many of the virtues and ethics of *Manas*, alongside its depiction of human/environment relations. Strength, resilience, honour, patience, and respect for nature are some of the qualities that developing a partnership with a golden eagle is believed to bring out in a *bürkütchü*, an eagle-hunter. Eagle-hunting is, furthermore, mentioned in the epic. Eagle-hunters develop their bond with eagles by means of vocalisations. These include talking, singing, humming, crooning and the culture-specific *kyittu* and *ku* as summon calls. With this paper, I look at the significance of these vocalisations in the wider context of Kyrgyz orality and how, both in the case of epic recitation as of eagle-hunting, vocality conveys heritage and relationships across time and species. In both contexts, voice acts as a link, simultaneously channelling human identities as they are defined against the non-human and giving voice to heritage whilst defining postcolonial identities with and against it. This echoes the role of epic and its recitation as a practice that embodies relations with ancestors but also human and non-human actors.

Keywords: Orality, Turkic epic, eagle-hunting, vocality, Kyrgyzstan.

Orality, Interspecies Bonds and Heritage

This paper discusses vocality and orality in relation to cultural heritage and interspecies relations. It argues that vocality is the medium through which Kyrgyz interspecies relations and postcolonial identity are co-produced. My case study focuses on Kyrgyzstan, exploring the use of vocality to develop partnerships with golden eagles in eagle-hunting. The paper relates this phenomenon to orality in Kyrgyz culture, particularly the transmission and recitation of the epic *Manas*. It examines the cultural significance of these practices in Kyrgyzstan's post-colonial heritage revival and their role in reaffirming cultural identity.

The paper poses vocality to foster bonds across species and across time. This happens in two ways. Firstly, by using their voices - and listening to the eagle's voice - humans weave relations with the non-human, establishing a partnership set to last for several decades. Secondly, by utilising vocalisations passed down for generations, the hunters preserve heritage and lineages in a way not dissimilar from the function of Kyrgyz epic (Reichl 1992, 2000). In this sense, vocally bonding with the non-human signifies strengthening the bond with one's lineage and heritage.

Both practices have become staples of the tourist experience in Kyrgyzstan. They are performed at the frequent festivals and mega-events that take place during spring and summer (Sheranova 2022a) and have been playing a role in renewing a sense of pride in being Kyrgyz following the "post-colonial resurgence of Turkic culture" (Thompson et al. 2006, 172). Oral art, as expressed in both epic poetry recitation and in the use of vocality to bond with golden eagles, is entangled with the celebration of Turkic heritage that has defined post-colonial politics and tourism agendas across Central Asia (Thompson 2004; Demchenko 2011; Kudaibergenova 2017).

Karen Thompson has highlighted how the development of Kyrgyzstan's "heritage tourism product" (2004, 370) has shifted from a focus on its environmental asset to cultural, intangible heritage, reflecting the increasing focus on ethnic Kyrgyz identity and nationalism. The *Manas* epos is categorised as intangible heritage due to its oral nature and the values it preserves and transmits, serving as a moral compass for the Kyrgyz people. Eagle-hunting has also been classified as intangible heritage due to the values it promotes, including coexistence with the environment whilst embodying the precepts of *Manas* with regards to human/non-human relations.

Eagle falconry is a cultural practice grounded in indigenous knowledge that channels nomadic codes of relationality with the landscape: the awareness of cycles, the importance of taking and giving back by respecting seasonality, learning from direct observation and shared experience with the non-human companion, the spiritual nature of non-human actors, be they animals, plants, stars or weather phenomena (McGough 2019; Levin and Süzükei 2006). It is founded upon a strong sense of reciprocity, a term that has recently come to the forefront of the conversation around indigenous conservation methods and environmental stewardship (Kimmerer 2013, 2025; Ibrahim 2024; Allen 2024).

I approach these issues from an (eco)musicological perspective, reading vocality as a tool of reciprocity, a means of cooperation, coexistence and partnership versus hegemony. Man-made sound is a known source of damage, alteration, and destruction of land and marine ecosystems (Thomson 2024; Anderssen 2023; Kunc et al. 2016). Emphasising the role of voices as an "in-between" (Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015, 5), I explore vocality and the voice here as a tool to enhance connection with the non-human and with heritage. Recent voice theory has highlighted the role of post-human voices as "spaces and 'channels' for forgotten, erased and future memories" (2022, 5).

This is exemplified by oral tradition but also by how vocality is used to pass on heritage in the context of interspecies relations.

In eagle-hunting, this is represented by the call *kyittu*, a vocalisation only used by the Kyrgyz, inherited as "the voice/sound of our ancestors" (Rinat Mirlanov, personal communication, 12 August 2024). Man-eagle vocality can thus be situated in the broader context of Kyrgyz orality as preservation of identity through the reaffirmation of nomadic heritage and knowledge emphasising the symbiotic existence of man and nature, imbued with a sense of the sacred (Dağyeli 2022). Here, I examine vocally bonding with golden eagles as a practice that can mitigate human-wildlife conflict by providing the opportunity for human and bird to know one another and coexist. As also noted by eagle-falconer Lauren McGough, who has studied eagle-man relationality among the Kazakh hunters of Bayan Olgii (Mongolia), as per traditional knowledge, eagles are believed to be able to exist both in domesticated contexts and in the wild, thus living along a spectrum (2019, 13). The rootedness of this practice in traditional, nomadic epistemology (Peemot 2024; Levin and Süzükei 2006; Fijn 2011; Vainshtein 1981; Vitebsky 2005), alongside its longevity, speaks of successful strategies for interspecies coexistence. Vocality is central to the development of the bond and, in this sense, a tool to sustain coexistence by fostering interspecies intimacy.

On the other hand, the imprinting of birds of prey is a controversial issue, which revolves around their habituation to man's presence, rendering them incapable of surviving on their own (Crawford 1991). This is the main point of divergence between indigenous falconers and ornithologists. It raises further questions related to the human voice as a tool for control and hegemony (Kohut 2015; Goodman 2012; McMurray and Mukhopadhyay 2024) rather than a channel for deeper mutual knowledge and improved coexistence (Yoon 2018). The implicit idea in this paper is that the vocality practised in the context of Kyrgyz eagle-hunting is sustainable by virtue of its being informed by local, nomadic knowledge, which puts reciprocity to the forefront of human relationships with nature. Additionally, vocality is an important channel for heritage and values which promote environmental sustainability as inherent to Kyrgyz identity and traditional practices and worldview.

On a surface level, a connection between interspecies vocality and traditional oral forms appears far-fetched and primarily dictated by values shared by eagle-hunters and *Manas* reciters (манасчылар - *manaschylar*). However, the concept of "word" (сөз - *söz*) is central in Kyrgyz culture and goes beyond mere verbal skill. During our conversation, *Manaschy* Samat Köchörbaev emphasized the deep relationship linking word to intention (ниет - *niet*) and thought (ой - *oi*). This endows word with a non-verbal presence and power that affects hearts, shaping perception. In this sense, the *manaschy* carries moral "responsibility" (Samat Köchörbaev, personal communication, 13 February 2026) and acts as a mediator between the divine and the people. Using Köchörbaev's words, "he is a bridge". The duty towards the people and as a guardian of traditional knowledge and history places demands on his body, too, which, as the voice's vessel, should be clean and well-taken care of (see also Baiymbetov 2025). Its state affects, in turn, voice quality (Çelik 2025; Titze 2000; Sundberg 1987). Therefore, the voice and the body mould each other, simultaneously transferring meaning between non-human (Kudai, Allah or God) and human entities.

The pure presence of word, the way it affects voice, bodies and, through them, timbre[1], alongside the interaction between humans and non-humans, manifests in vocal relationships between

[1] The unique tone or colour of a singer's voice that distinguishes it from others. It is shaped by physical anatomy (vocal tract) and technique.

eagle-hunters and eagles. Eagleman Almazbek Akunov pointed out that eagles do not want to work with a man who drinks, lies, smokes cigarettes. In other words, a man who does not carry himself according to certain moral standards. This oozes out of the hunters' physical but also vocal presence: the voice is the second most important tool, after food, in persuading an eagle to cooperate with man and develop intimacy between the two. According to Master Almazbek, lying, backbiting, slandering – that is, misusing word – are the expressions of a bad conscience and an unpolished heart, which the eagle feels and listens to.

These ideas point to a social function of the voice that embodies relations with non-human entities, history, and heritage. The vocality of eagle-hunting and *Manas* reveals the deep interconnection of two practices beyond mere shared values. It tells us that orality, aurality and vocality embody human ways of being and knowing together with non-humans, including the divine, landscape, animals, that form the fabric of Kyrgyz identity.

Of Eagles and Men: Vocally Intertwining Lives in Central Asia

Hunting with golden eagles has a long history in Central Asia as an art, tradition, and, recently, a tourist attraction that contributes to the livelihood of local communities (MacGough 2019; Soma 2015). In Turkic cultures and beliefs, powerful symbolism is ascribed to the golden eagle, which also has a special place in Shamanism. The first shaman is believed to have been born from the union between an eagle and a woman. The eagle is said to have acted as a messenger between Tanrı (God, see Güngör 2013; Sultanova 2018; Laruelle 2007; Baldick 2000) and men. Tanrı sent the eagle to teach men how to protect themselves. However, the lack of a shared language between the eagle and men caused it to return to Tanrı, only to be commanded to descend again (Bayat 2005). The eagle is revered for its strength and courage, while its traditional role as a mediator between man and God endows it with an aura of sacrality. In shamanic beliefs, eagles are the rulers of the sky, as the grey wolf rules the earth. The birds are regarded as the link and enabler of communication between the earth and the sky (Şahin 2021). They also had a social role in nomadic communities as helpers, alongside dogs and horses. Masters Aitbek Sulaimanbekov and Salavat Aibekov remarked that, in the pre-Soviet period, an eagle played an essential part in the community's subsistence strategies (personal communication, 17 November and 4 December 2024). In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, eagles are still active shapers of the hunters' social world, affecting their interactions with other community members, who regard eagle-hunters as a separate category of people enmeshed, like eagles themselves, in the domesticated and the wild in equal measure.

Hunters understand eagles as creatures belonging to a different ontological realm (see also Dağyeli 2022). Ochoa Gautier addresses the role of sound in the distinction and definition of personhood (2014). She highlights how "envoicing animal sounds" (63) allowed the Colombian *bogas* to move between human and non-human worlds due to "the shared capacity of humans and animals to have a voice" (63). However, to Western listeners, the rowers' vocality was not understood as a channel to move from the human to the non-human. It, instead, suggested the rowers' animality. This evokes Dolar's idea, taken from Aristotle, that "mere voice is what animals and men have in common" (2006, 114). In eagle-hunting vocalising, whilst voice is understood as a path to developing intimacy and sounds that resemble eagles' calls are performed to call them back, the vocal interaction takes place to create a bond between two ontologically separate beings. This sense of distinction informs human/non-human relationships in Central Asia (Dağyeli 2022), but it does not impede the

construction of a partnership. The awareness of difference and that each being, human and non-human, has its role in the landscape, enables synchronicity and cooperation.

In Kyrgyzstan, an eagle-falconer is known as a *bürkütchü* (бүркүтчү). Eagles are taken from their nest at two months of age. Sometimes, the birds are trapped from the wild when they are adults and have already been taught how to hunt by their mother. In either case, they are then taken to the hunter's home where their training begins. However, before any training occurs, the eagles must become familiar with their human partner's presence. This is achieved by spending time with the eagle, without allowing anybody else to feed it or talk to it. Talking, humming, crooning, singing to the eagle is done frequently to habituate the bird to her[2] human partner's timbre. This aspect is taken very seriously by the hunters, whose eaglets are guarded strictly, in the early years of their life, against other people's intrusion.

Hunters prefer training female eagles due to their superior speed and strength (see also McGough 2019), but the practice is nearly entirely male-dominated in Kyrgyzstan.[3] The very few exceptions include daughter of eagle-hunters who were primarily trained by their fathers to look after the birds in their absence. One example is Gülaida Jorobekova, from Jalal-Abad. The predominance of male hunters is due to social and historical reasons alongside body constitution. In the traditional organisation of the nomadic village, women had specific jobs, which they still perform today in a community such as Bokonbaevo's, the eagle-hunters' village. Eagle-falconer Aitbek Sulaimanbekov told me that hunting is incompatible with women's many tasks, that revolve around taking care of the family, of cattle, and the house (November 2024). Ishenbek Kydyrov highlighted that hunting is very physically demanding, requiring men to hold an 8-9 kg eagle on their arm while climbing mountains on horseback (August 2024). I have witnessed hunting taking place in the winter, which also involves waiting for hours in the freezing cold early morning. While Kyrgyz women are used to the landscape and perfectly capable of climbing mountains with or without horseback, the only female hunters one sees in Kyrgyzstan are foreigners, usually from the USA, who come to study Kyrgyz eagle-falconry. The main issue with local women hunters appears to be physical capacity and, most importantly, traditional roles. Similar reasons, and particularly the demands made on the body by recitation lasting for days and hours, are adduced when addressing the predominance of male *Manas* reciters. Additionally, societal recognition is achieved insofar as the father or husband of the reciter grant her support, which highlights the impact, upon female involvement, of "socio–cultural norms of patriarchal society" and of the "concepts of *ichkeri/tyshkary* (private and public), *uyat/namys* (shame/honor) and *morality/immorality* in Kyrgyz culture" (Toktogulova 2022, 325). The latter concepts are implicit to discussions of female eagle-hunting. They are part of relational dynamics between men and women in whose context the practice of hunting unfolds. In the relationship with the non-human, however, the eagle is allowed to venture into territories forbidden to women. McGough observes about Kazakh hunters that

[2] Hunting eagles are always female due to their greater speed and size.

[3] In Kazakhstan and among the Kazakhs living in Mongolia, however, women hunters have begun to gain greater visibility, often in conjunction with events such as the 2024 5th World Nomad Games. The story of the young Aisholpan Nurgaiv (a Kazakh girl from Mongolia) was told in the 2013 documentary *The Eagle-Huntress*. While this did not result in an opening towards widespread female eagle-hunting practice – male eagle-hunters are still the overwhelming majority at contests and festivals – the younger generation seems inclined towards greater acceptance. This is the case in Kyrgyzstan, where eagle-hunters in their late twenties are often speaking favourably about the possibility for women hunters to be trained.

> the womanhood of the eagle is in no way diminished, even as the *berkutchi* extols the hunting prowess of his eagle, something that could never be said about a Kazakh wife. In a society where there are strict gender norms and roles, it is very interesting that eagles are allowed to transgress them and are celebrated for it. (2019, 23)

I have not personally heard Kyrgyz hunters talking about the eagle's femininity or womanhood, although their discourses revolve around love and are imbued with the sense of physical, mental and emotional partnership with the birds.

The bond developed through presence and vocality is tested using the culture-specific vocalisation *kyittu*, used to call the eagles back to the glove. The eagle's response to this summons determines not only the strength of the partnership but the status of the hunter as a man before his fellow eagle-hunters and community. His reputation, as it were, depends on the speed of the eagle's response, which defines the depth of the partnership and success during hunting (Talgar Shaibyrov, personal communication, 4 December 2024). Eagles are, in a sense, shapers of men's identities.

The importance of the speed of response is rooted in the social role that golden eagles traditionally had. Hunter Aitbek Sulaimanbekov explained that eagles were even more valuable, and closer to men, than dogs because their catch could feed the families of as many as twenty yurts (personal communication, 17 November 2024). The fact that eagles have their own allocated vocalisation, *kyittu*, similarly to dogs, horses, and cats is also telling of their own standing in the community, showing their being on a par with all the other pets that had roles in sustaining the village (see also Dağyeli 2022).

Philosopher Mladen Dolar has highlighted the link between voice and subjectivity by calling it its "kernel" (2006, 23). In this partnership, and through this vocalisation, the direction of the human voice towards its non-human counterpart is not merely a command. It is, simultaneously, a recognition of the non-human's agency and capacity to respond by will. This is strongly linked to the golden eagle's nature, which is believed by Kyrgyz and Kazakh hunters alike to be endowed with its own mind and personhood (McGough 2019).

Agencies of the Intangible: Bonds of Air and Voice

Adil, 14-year-old apprentice to Master Falconer Ruslan Kubatbekov, sat in the battered van to my left. A smartphone in his hand, and an 11-year-old female golden eagle named Karachyn perched on his forearm.

"Do you talk to eagles?" I asked Adil.

"We always talk to them - she is talking to us now".

A few hours later, we met with a group of tourists eager to see Master Ruslan fly his eagles. "Does she make this sound the whole day?" asked a man. "When they hear men's voices," answered Ruslan. When not in flight, eagles are blindfolded. Knowledge of their surroundings comes through sound. The hunter's voice is their navigation tool.

"She is talking to us now". A subject, an action, and time. Present, continuous, unfolding through unintelligible calls. Agency shifted from us to her; she became the subject of our sentence and the all-encompassing object of our attention. The distinction has been scrutinised and problematised by new theorisations of the agency of materiality, such as Bennett's (2010), that redefine the idea of "subject" and "object". Music studies and policymaking have also recently focused on the agency of matter and the matter of agency. A politics of immateriality has been

explored by Davies (2023), whose history of "the ways of ranking the human in relation to… political ecology" (23) intertwines with the use and commodification of air as a tool for control.

Davies highlights how breathing is tamed to "reconfigure the role of individual organs and bodies in the production of vocal sound" (Borowski 2024). In human/eagle partnerships, voice and air also act as forces reconfiguring roles. Eagle falconers, at once masters and apprentices of eagles, learn how to read the air. Their "intricate knowledge about the movement of air currents" allows them to "see the air" (Azevedo and Schroer 2016, 184). The threads of vocality are used to direct, weaving a partnership whose fabric is trust and intimacy (see Dolar 2006). Eagles are intimately acquainted with their masters' voices. Master falconers, intimately acquainted with the ways of the wind and currents, use what they read to teach eagles to master air. Falconers train eagles, creatures of the air, to become masters of the air. Eagles train falconers, masters of the air, to become hunters, creatures inhabiting the domestic/wild boundary.

Masters are not, however, owners. Men do not own eagles any more than eagles own the air: birds and their element are unbound, and binding. Thus, men are entangled by immaterial threads with birds, as birds learn to navigate the sky and the winds through voices. Falconers are bound to their eagles by affection (*meerim*), which should "flow" from the apprentice "as much as one is able to" (Dzhorobekova 2019, para. 3). The boundary between them is maintained through fear and awe, which engender respect. Eagles, on the other hand, are free to leave (McGough 2019). The partnership's success relies on "mutual practical experience with one another as individuals" (135), and awareness of each other as distinct entities. McGough highlights the reconfiguration of roles in Kazakh man/eagle apprenticeships: "…the eagle becomes an apprentice… The berkutchi is going through great lengths to learn to communicate effectively with his eagle, and the eagle herself must learn to interpret the behavior of her human partner". (2, 174, 2019).

Interspecies partnerships have long been vital for navigating and for subsistence on the Central Asian landscape (Dağyeli 2022, 2023; McGough 2019; Levin and Süzükei 2010; Vitebsky 2005; Vainshtein 1981). These apprenticeships "saturate the landscape and challenge the notion of human exceptionalism" (McGough 2019, 2). These shifting configurations, moulding flight, also redefine human and non-human relations to the landscape and the elements. Humans and non-humans exchange roles as master and apprentice in the same way as air resembles water, while air and earth collaborate to shape flight in equal measure. "In the world of falconer and bird", write Azevedo and Schroer, "wind and weather take on affective material qualities. Earth and air are also perceived as co-constituting each other, rather than as belonging to separate spheres". (2016, 185). In the domain of air masters and creatures, air is tactile, its currents comparable to "the fluid medium of water as it flows in rivers and 'oceans' and 'surfing waves'" (188).

In the context of these shifting interspecies and interelemental agencies, the partnership has the more obvious shared goal of catching prey. However, the real sign of an eagle-hunter's mastery is to persuade his eagle to return. In other words, his success lies in having established familiarity between himself and the eagle, an animal which cannot be trained to obey as a horse or dog (see McGough 2019; Kolbaev 2019). The eagle's return to her human partner is a mark of prestige, but it is never taken for granted. For it to take place, the hunter must sketch for his eagle an invisible topography, as it were, drawn from voices. When not hunting, eagles are blindfolded. They orientate themselves through sound, and recognition of the hunter's timbre is essential to find him when out on the mountains. This familiarity is constructed through consistent vocal engagement, presence and repetition. In a sense, the eagle-hunter acts as a bard, repeating a series of sound and instructions - as well as gestures - that will guide the eagle to return. As is the case with an epic's audience, these

repeated ritualised vocalisations and gestures act as signposts. Most importantly, the hunter and the eagle are engaged in a process of call and response through which they co-create the hunting performance. As is the case with the bard and his listeners, non-human responses shape human action, and vice versa. The nature of the golden eagle is key to these dynamics, due to her ascribed ability to choose whether to return to the glove or not (Mcough 2019; Salavat Aibekov, personal communication, 28 August 2024).

Two sounds are mainly employed to summon eagles during hunting: the previously mentioned *kyittu* and *ku*. Eagle-hunter Temirkan Bolotbekov explained that it is used when the hunter and the eagle are on the mountains and she has flown too far away to be able to locate the hunter quickly (personal communication, 19 August 2024). As a vocalisation, it responds to the landscape, embodying, in a way, senses of distance and proximity. "It is more immediate. *Kyittu* is too long for her to be able to hear it from a distance", Temirkan remarked. This recalls Aitmatov's description of Saiakpai Karalaev's vocality, able to convey landscapes and the human/non-human relations constituting them. While the hunter is not reciting for an audience, his understanding of his voice in this human/non-human exchange shares epic's capacity to summon the environments that make one's history and identity. Vocality, here, demonstrates an awareness of space and how this shapes human/non-human interactions. Epic recitation shares this capacity, and the bard's voice to bring the past closer to the audience, mediating through his own voice their relationship with it.

"The Voice/Sound (Ун-Ün) of Our Ancestors": Voicing Heritage

In my studied context, developing a bond with an eagle also means weaving a bond with heritage. The bond to heritage is, in fact, vocalised: *kyittu*, a culture-specific vocalisation only found among Kyrgyz eagle-hunters. It is an example of "transpecies pidgin" (Kohn 2007, 14) that draws on language's principles to construct words by using animal sounds (Fijn 2011; Lukina 2020): *kyittu* resembles the sound of *kaytuu* (кайтуу), "to return". To my question of whether this semantic proximity might be the reason for using this sound, all the eagle-hunters confessed they did not know. To them, it is mainly a sound passed down for generations, from master to apprentice, thus representing a strong link to tradition, the pre-Soviet past, Kyrgyz identity and ancestry. A theme in recent sound and voice studies is that of voice - or sound - in relation to time, memory and the archive (Maksudyan 2024; McMurray and Mukhopadhyay 2024; see also Bentivegna and Edlund 2022). In this sense, the vocalisation *kyittu* acts as a channel, linking entities across species and time.

By *kyittu*, eagles and ancestry are summoned back. As a species-specific and culture-specific vocalisation, it reinforces an interspecies bond that is highly symbolic of the past in this period of cultural revival. The call to return is also symbolic of interspecies mutuality and the relationship with pre-colonial culture. In both contexts, voice acts as a link, simultaneously channelling human identities as they are defined against the non-human and giving voice to heritage whilst defining postcolonial identities with and against it. This echoes the role of epic and its recitation as a practice that embodies relations with ancestors but also human and non-human actors.

Vocality, in partnerships with golden eagles, cannot be used to control the bird. Similarly, a *Manas* reciter – as an eagle, a mediator between the human and the divine – is not in charge of the recitation: the recitation comes to him, and he becomes simply the means for its manifestation (Baiymbetov 2025). Local conceptions of eagles point to their agency, expressed, for example, in their choice to return to the glove. Thus, hunters understand themselves as engaged in a constant negotiation and "intellectual pursuit" (McGough 2019, 61) with eagles. The process entails shaping

one's identity as an eagle-hunter, that is, someone who can talk to eagles or, as a local expression goes, finding their language. However, it also entails situating oneself in history by vocalising ties of ancestry that encompass awareness of landscape, of nearness and distance in human/non-human relations, of cosmogonies and social roles.

Awareness of the land, including its sonic identities, mediates the damage of man-made sound in this partnership. However, the practice of hunting itself can reveal some contradictions, depending on whether this is looked at through local and foreign eyes. By foreign, here, I also refer to Kyrgyz actors who are not familiar with Issyk-Kul's landscape. To the hunters, hunting, which relies on silence and then sudden violent, loud vocalisations urging the eagle to catch the prey and sometimes intertwining with dogs' barks, is part of their relationship to nature, which encompasses harmony and conflict. Additionally, a relationship with the prey that is as deep as the one with the eagle exists, both being determined by destiny (тагдыр – *thagdyr*). Highlighting that each prey is written for the hunter and that they, in a sense, look for one another, eagle-hunter Almazbek Akunov complemented Jan E. Dizard and Mary Zeiss Stange's point that "one cannot successfully hunt an animal one does not know and know intimately… the hunt… helped our ancestors to understand their relationship to the environments in which they found themselves" (2022, 17). Vocality, on the one hand, cements the man-eagle partnership through the bird's knowledge and recognition of timbre – a temporary point of reference signifying home during the years they spend hunting together. On the other, its interpretation as an agent of environmental destruction seemingly relies on two opposite understandings. The first looks at hunting as traditional practice central to culture and relationships with the environment and as a tool for education – an understanding common to indigenous worldviews (Ingold 1986, 2000; Nadasdy 2007; Carvalhedo Reis 2009). The other, frames hunting as a practice deeply disruptive of relations between humans and non-humans, and between humans and humans (Elbert et al. 2010; Flynn 2002).

In Kyrgyz culture, the philosophy of hunting encompasses balance with nature, spiritual respect, moral discipline, partnership with animals, community sharing. Hunting was and still is a form of moral training. And yet, eagle-hunting specifically embodies the complex "hunt as love and kill" (Kelly and Rule 2013) psychology which blurs the boundary between antagonism and intimacy. Two relationships are vocally mediated. One, with the eagle, embodying cooperation, harmony with nature, is fostered through whispering, frequent and spontaneous talking, singing, task-specific calls. The other, rooted in conflict, rivalry is with the prey, and it is vocally expressed through silence and the abrupt violence of shouts and cries. We observe that vocality as either a tool for reciprocity or one to cause harm is entwined with heritage and ancestral relations to the landscape. The short epic *Kojojash* (Кожожаш), narrating the story of a skilled and very successful but excessively violent hunter, is an example of vocal rendition of the practice, accompanied by the *komuz*[4]. The voice here not only conveys the story of a hunter but embodies all the contrasting emotions that characterise man's relationship with nature. Sudden ascending lines, rising pitch and marked rhythmic recitation translate the movements, long waits and instant action, whispering and feverish cheering and whooping, of the hunt[5].

The Kyrgyz understanding of relationships to the land and its non-human inhabitants reaches the zenith of its vocal manifestation in the recitation of *Manas*, which we will turn to next.

[4] Traditional Kyrgyz three-stringed plucked instrument and one of the most important symbols of Kyrgyz cultural heritage.

[5] An example can be found at the following link:
https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/epic/kojojash/kojojash.mp3

The Manaschy

The concepts of familiarity and response which have emerged so far in relation to interspecies vocality are features of Kyrgyz oral art. They reinforce a sense of belonging and ethnic identity, cementing individuals' relationships with the past and their surrounding contexts.

Manaschy Samat Köchörbaev, one of the epic's foremost reciters today, drew a clear boundary between song and *Manas* recitation, and the latter's centrality to Kyrgyz identity:

> The words mentioned in *Manas* are elevated language, not everyday expressions. They are words that come from the past, endlessly powerful words. These are words that have been passed down from father to son, that belong to the people, they are heritage. The essence of *Manas* is people's (елдик – *eldik)*. Sayakbai Ata[6] used to say, 'I recite the people's *Manas* to the people'. To recite to the people, the *manaschy* acts as a sacred bridge… The spoken word, intention, wish – the *manaschy* needs to take them out of his body and have them reach the people" (Personal communication, 13 February 2026).

Manaschy Samat went on to point out that this bridge connected people to their history, their values, their identity, their culture, their beliefs, their language when the Kyrgyz distanced themselves from them, in the Soviet period. "That is our history. We find everything in *Manas*".

Forms of vocality are non-material cultural expressions that preserve the wider (intangible) heritage of values, principles, genealogies, ethics, and language. The singer, or bard, is not merely a performer: he brings things into being, closer to a shaman than an entertainer (Reichl 1992; Sultanova 2011). Karl Reichl has discussed the relationship between epic recitation and shamanism, as the bard casts spells on the audience by his verbal mastery (1992; Howard and Kasmambetov 2010). The bard does not only sing about the past: he channels it through his presence. He becomes the history he narrates and, through his voice, not only events but also natural elements are brought into being. In the words of celebrated author Chinghiz Aitmatov (1928-2008), as he described Saiakpai Karalaev (1894-1971):

> Like a symphony orchestra, he varied and changed his voice a thousand times. He moved from tragedy to lyrical songs, from lyrics he moved to drama, then within a short time he burst into tears, then became joyful, then tired, then became energetic again. Sometimes he sounded like a teeming army of soldiers, sometimes he became as calm as a lake, sometimes he became like a fast and strong wind, and rushed like a river (Köchümkulova 2005, para. 47).

"Intimately connected to the… development of the Turkic tribes and nations" (Reichl 1992, 15), epic, furthermore, played an essential role in the development of a post-Soviet national consciousness (Sultanova 2011). *Manas* has, perhaps more than any other, acted as a "cornerstone of state ideology" (Thompson 2004, 376). Roza Kydyrbaeva has remarked that:

> The epic *Manas* is not only the history of the Kyrgyz people, it… reflects all the aspects of their life: i.e., their ethnic composition, economy, traditions and customs, morals and values, aesthetics, codes of behavior, their relationship with their surroundings and nature, their religious worldview, their knowledge about astronomy

[6] The legendary *manaschy* Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971).

> and geography, and artistic oral poetry and language (1995, 8, cited in Köchümkulova 2005, para. 5).

During my most recent fieldwork in Bishkek (April-May 2025), I visited artist Mairamkul Musabai, one of the founders of the Salbuurun Federation, which preserves the traditional Kyrgyz hunt with eagles, horses and *taigan* dogs. As he explained the *Manas*-related symbolism in his paintings, emphasising the deep bond between orality and Kyrgyz values, he reiterated that these are not stored in written words, but in the chest of Kyrgyz people. His observation evokes a sense of sacrality ascribed to words whose meanings are stored in the heart, rather than a manuscript, thus keeping them alive.

Orality has a unique way of connecting the self to its surroundings. Walter Ong talks about the auditive experience as one that places the individual at a "core of sensation and existence" ([1982] 2002, 71). Carole Pegg discusses the same enveloping quality of hearing with reference to the Altai-Sayan people, highlighting the role of vocal sound in evoking senses of "kinship, human ancestry, and lineage" (2024, 57). Therefore, particularly in the case of epic works, hearing is belonging, and the link to the deep past is maintained not only through transmission but through the performance of narratives that place the individual - returning to Ong's words - at the centre of existence in time and of a cobweb of values, events, ecologies, cosmogonies, and genealogies.

Most importantly, the recitation of epic poetry is a shared act (Howard and Kasmambetov 2010). Changes in the telling of the poem are the result of the "relationship between the singer and the audience" (Howard and Kasmambetov 2010, 73). Keith Howard and Saparbek Kasmambetov cite the six changes identified by Albert Lord (1960) in an epic poem's recitation. These are: "saying the same thing in less or more lines, expanding ornamentation and detail, changing sequence order, adding material that was not learnt from others, omitting material, and substituting one theme for another" (2010, 73). They occur in response to the listeners' reactions, which presuppose a degree of familiarity and expertise on their part. Indeed, the stories from *Manas* are well known to the Kyrgyz, and this enables the listeners' agency and, in a sense, co-direction of the performance.

While the audience stimulates the creativity of the singer through its demands and the consequent adjustments he applies, his performance is also carefully crafted to elicit certain responses from the listeners. In other words, singer and audience are co-creators, and the telling of oral poetry is, to some extent, a call and response process. The recitation of *Manas* would traditionally take place in a yurt, where people from the community would gather, often for celebrations, feasts or during Ramadan nights. In Howard's and Alma Kunanbaeva's words:

> The singer 'suck[ed] the listener into the rhythm of life itself' and life was 'measured by the totality of the moments of empathy between listeners and storyteller'; behind the singer, the listener 'sensed the patron spirit' and felt 'his spine set on fire' (Kunanbaeva 2009 [1981]). Or, alternatively, 'the expectations of the listeners gave birth to song' (Kunanbaeva 1991, 2; Howard and Kasmambetov 2010, 85).

This passage conveys the "immediacy of the familiar" (x) that Howard ascribes to oral performance. Time appears suspended as the listeners are "sucked" into the stories, and yet they can simultaneously situate themselves in a geography of histories, lineages, genealogies, values thanks to the auditive experience. As the sense of time is lost and listening enables listeners to be pervaded by

the events of the narration, the emotions of its characters, the places of its victories and defeats, the bard provides his audience with a clear topography of their time and place in history.

Two concepts which characterise bard-audience interaction have emerged: familiarity and response. Repetition, a rhetorical device commonly used in epic, or recurrent patterning, helps listeners orientate themselves in the unfolding narrative: "repetition creates a pull… towards the specific episode being sung and… towards previous or other uses of the same theme" (Lord 1960: 94, cited in Howard and Kasmambetov 2010, 70). The repetition of "ideas… episodes… speeches, lines and words" (Bashiri 1999/2020, 23) provides a map by which the recitation of the past can be navigated through signposts. In Reichl's words:

> Repetition helps to drive home a point, to set the key to a passage, or simply to delight by prolonging the singing. The listener does not, as the reader may, find repetition tedious; indeed, he needs a certain amount of redundancy to be able to follow what is sung (1992, 249).

Post-Soviet and Postcolonial? Ways of Listening

Throughout my conversations with hunters and reciters, the link between the act of saying and identity emerged. The relationship has been examined, in musicology, by Katherine Bergeron (2010) in the context of new approaches to reading and pronouncing French and their connection to the development of French art song *mélodie* in the Belle Epoque. A similar process unfolded, in the late nineteenth century, in Ottoman Istanbul as new language pedagogy emerged parallel to the meteoric rise of the song genre *şarkı* (Nardella 2023). In both contexts, the song genre provided space for identity to be voiced because of acquiring skill in pronouncing and reading words.

The art of word performance – and the significance of recited words – highlighted by *manaschy* Samat, however, requires listeners, and not only performers. If we posit the act of listening as a 'return' – as suggested by the *manaschy* – we can link the question of who is listening to issues, addressed by recent scholarship, about "what it means to be 'post-Soviet'" (Koplatadze 2025, 1). The matter of whether post-Soviet equals postcolonial is deeply relevant to the role played by eagle-hunting and *Manas* recitation, as sound-centred practices and performances, to the shaping of national identity. Other questions are linked to the complicated relationship between ethnic identity and nation-building in Central Asia (Paskaleva 2015; Blakkisrud and Kuziev 2019; Polese and Sheranova 2023). In particular, the Soviets' invention of "five nationalities: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek", each of which, "regardless of the historical and cultural reality, got its own language, history and territory" (Howard and Kasmambetov 2010, 84).

Eagle-hunting sits in a peculiar spot with regards to cultural commonality, ethnicity and national borders. Shared by Kazakhstan and the Kazakh community in Bayan-Olgii, Mongolia, it is an example of cultural practices that sit uncomfortably within the confines of ethno-nations, while simultaneously being marketed, as heritage tourism, as quintessentially Kyrgyz or Kazakh (see Rancier 2018 for a similar process in the music-making of the Kazakh nation). Additionally, its inclusion in the World Nomad Games supported by Turkey, incorporates it in a wider regional strategy to showcase and foster a sense of brotherhood among Turkic communities and countries. Karen Thompson has identified a trend to prioritise intangible heritage in Kyrgyzstan and linked it to the post-colonial resurgence of national, ethnic and Turkic identity (2004). Epic poetry has traditionally served an essential function in preserving nomadic and tribal culture and values, the "intangible elements of their heritage with which the Kyrgyz identify most closely" (371). She further

points out that epics, most notably *Manas*, are "living heritage" (373), with a tangible effect on everyday life, customs, rites and activities.

Tamar Koplatadze examines literature as a site in which the boundary between colonized and postcolonial selfhood is simultaneously blurred and defined (2025). Gauging the measure in which the "hybrid structures" of Central Asian postcolonial states "reject, revise and retain the ideologies of the colonial state" (9), she echoes the point made by David Chioni Moore that "the cultures of postcolonial lands are characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence […] between resistance and complicity, and between imitation (or mimicry) and originality" (2001, 112). Koplatadze further points out that

> the term 'postcolonial' rarely signifies a definite break with colonialism, rather, it suggests that when ex-colonial countries gained national sovereignty or independence, they moved from colonial to apparently autonomous, postcolonial status, which often represented only an initial, relatively minor shift from direct to indirect rule, and a transition towards a position not so much of independence, as in-dependence (9).

One area in which this "form of neocolonialism" (9) is particularly evident is the use of Russian instead of Kyrgyz, a topic of debate whose intensity I have experienced first-hand in several separate but related contexts. These were my conversations with both old and young eagle-hunters, artist and *taigan* dog breeder (тайганчы) Mairamkul Musabai, *manaschy* Samat Köchörbaev and a personal interview, in January 2026, with journalist Ernis Kyiaz in which I was asked about the experience of learning and communicating in Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan. Current language practice in Kyrgyzstan ranges from an attempt to "move beyond the Soviet experience" (Koplatadze 2001, 5) to deeply internalised, Russian-language-centred collective and individual self-narratives. These led older interlocutors to respond to my request for the Kyrgyz word for a concept or object by saying "we do not have a word in Kyrgyz for this. There is only a Russian one"[7]. And, after some reflection: "we used to have these words, but we do not use them and have now forgotten them". This has deep implications when the topic of discussion is heritage, be it *Manas*, eagle-hunting or traditional symbols and patterns. During our encounter, painter Mairamkul Musabai confessed "I sometimes use very old words that those around me do not understand. They express very deep and ancient concepts that shaped the Kyrgyz people's understanding of the world around them" (personal communication, 5 May 2025). Conversations with eagle-hunters, too, reveal the deep connection between Kyrgyz terms and the tradition. One such example is the word *sonor* (сонор), an old term that indicates the first snow of winter as the ideal time and condition for hunting. This word effectively embodies a whole philosophy related to hunting, tracking and knowledge of the weather. However, it is nearly completely unknown. This prompted Obolbek Mamytov, author of a book on the relation between this weather phenomenon and hunting with dogs and birds of prey, to share, in a post on his Instagram account: "The word *sonor* is not used and has been nearly forgotten by our Kyrgyz people. We hope that it will be used again after having read our book, *Sonor*" (@sonor 700, 17 June 2025).

Mairamkul's daughter also pointed out this 'incommunicability': "sometimes, we do not understand what my father says. He uses complicated words". It is worth highlighting that she was born and raised in sovereign Kyrgyzstan, which leads to the second point: the involvement of young practitioners, all born after independence (1991) in both eagle-hunting and oral arts such as *Manas* and *dastan* (дастан) recitation, and improvisational poetry (төкмө акынчылык – *akynchylyk*). The

[7] It should be noted that I cannot speak Russian.

performance of traditional practices by the youth reveals the complexity of the postcolonial discourse in Central Asia. The younger generation of hunters takes pride in embodying the nomadic spirit and tradition, while simultaneously fluidly switching between Kyrgyz and Russian as resources – and not antagonists – to share their heritage with the world. Indeed, on several occasions interlocutors did not seem to immediately perceive the difference between the two languages while explaining aspects of the practice. Rather, they drew upon them in equal measure. The word mostly used for hunting is, incidentally, *okhota* (охота) rather than the Kyrgyz *angchylyk* (аңчылык). The eagle-hunters also often refer to one another as *ochotnik* (охотник), instead of the Kyrgyz *angchy* (аңчы).

The discourse around *söz* (word) deeply interweave with language ideology and traditional ritual:

> The *manaschy* believe that the Manas epic must be performed in the Kyrgyz language as the sanctioned medium through which direct spiritual communication with ancestral spirits (*ata-baba arbagy*) is realized. This is because, for them, the Kyrgyz language is considered the native and intelligible tongue of the ancestors. Secondly, the language serves as a repository of traditional and spiritual knowledge, encoded in various lexical forms and sonic expressions. Thus, it functions as a vital link to the past. Thirdly, the performance of the epic generates a distinct sonic resonance with the local environment. Natural sounds—flowing water, wind, animal calls—are reflected in the rhythmic structure, alliteration, and phonetic embodiment of the epic (Feld 1996) … One of the key functions of the ritual, then, is the creation of a unified sacred ecosystem that bridges the human and non-human worlds (Baiymbetov 2025, 152).

Understanding word as a mediator between human and non-human worlds brings us back to *kyittu*, the word, semantically related to the Kyrgyz verb *kaytuu* (to return), used by the eagle-hunters to summon eagles to the glove. In the light of our considerations on language, identity and postcolonial revival, we, however, observe that this "return" unfolds within a system of thinking that fluctuates between colonized and postcolonial identity, between being a *bürküt menen angchy* (бүркүт менен аңчы) and an *okhotnik s berkutom* (охотник с беркутом) – a hunter with golden eagle. Remarkably, the younger generation is no exception: in the city, the youth prefer to use Russian, still thought to be intellectually superior[8] and granting access to the outside world.

Aibek Baiymbetov makes an important point about the listeners to the epic, who, observed by the spirits, prompt the selection of recited episodes: they "unconsciously shape the narrative—their collective intentions and unspoken expectations calling forth the tale they need to hear" (2025, 160). "Though the epic originates from and returns to the people, the audience is more than passive recipients. Their presence reinforces cultural reproduction, social cohesion, and traditional values," Bayimbetov continues (166). The question of who the listeners are – be they human or non-human actors – appears related, to me, to the issue of performing identity in a postcolonial context in which "sovereignty derives… from 'the people'" (Partlett and Küpper 2022, 8). This is because ways of listening to heritage are shaped by narratives of individual and collective selfhood existing in a continuum between colonized and postcolonial identities. The construction of a national identity resembles the way in which *Manas* recitation is the result of a tacit collaboration between the epic poem itself, its reciter and listeners. In other words, paradoxically, the identity revival through the

[8] I have heard a similar idea from S., an Azerbaijani friend, when visiting Baku in summer 2025: "Azerbaijani is more poetic, but Russian is way more sophisticated. It is superior. I use Azerbaijani for love. For all the rest, nothing compares to Russian".

two cultural practices described can only exist in so far as the colonial structures it seeks to free itself from regulate its unfolding. Colonial hierarchies persist culturally and epistemologically: Russian linguistic dominance, cultural prestige systems, knowledge production, research methodologies. Thus, heritage becomes a tool of state-building, which, "in the former Soviet Union… is similar to other post-colonial areas where a former colony continues or imitates the power structures inherited from colonial rule but modifies them according to their specific needs" (Partlett and Küpper 2022, 78).

Arzuu Sheranova has examined mega-events (2022a) and the invention of the World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan (2021) as an occasion to attract funding and legitimise power. The Nomad Games in particular, she points out, were instituted "under the slogan of nomadism" (2021, 66). In these events, the nation is re-imagined through performance, and "national heroes, national myths and national histories are sources of deep feelings of dignity" (68). Approaching cultural performance as "nation-building and legitimation" (2022b, 2), she draws attention to the 1000-year anniversary of *The Epic of Manas* that was celebrated in 1995. She describes it as "a national identity-shaping event along with its cultural tourism agenda" (2).

The practice of eagle-hunting and its performance for tourist audiences also play a role in Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet cultural identity reaffirmation. Elmira Köchümkulova highlighted, during a conversation in Bishkek in September 2023, the peculiar struggles that characterise Kyrgyzstan's journey, and the place of eagle-hunting and its marketing as cultural heritage. Köchümkulova discussed the impact of tourism not only from an economic perspective but for the opportunity it offers young generations to reconnect with traditional culture and identity. According to Köchümkulova, most people, particularly the youth, "might not even know the word for 'eagle' in Kyrgyz" (personal communication, 11 September 2023). However, she remarked, the thought that a foreign tourist would visit Kyrgyzstan to see them would engender pride in something that foreigners find valuable.

Conclusions

This paper defined some of the key concepts informing vocality and orality in Central Asian human/non-human relationships. These encompass animals, landscapes, and heritage as endowed with its own agency and capacity to shape these relations or be shaped by them. It has examined vocal phenomena as embodiments of a complex and ambivalent engagement with the colonised mindset among the older generation, who grew up in the Soviet era, and the youth who were born in an independent Kyrgyzstan. Among eagle-hunters and voice performers, the former coloniser is still an everyday presence through language, although their involvement in traditional practices is an expression of their desire to preserve heritage. Voices are bridges between the human and non-human – be they animals or the spiritual realm. While vocality is a tool through which these relationships are maintained, orality provides the framework in which the vocal mediation of relations can be interpreted. This framework is closely linked to the power and agency of the uttered and recited word, which summons ancestry, heritage and is also the measure by which boundaries between the colonised mind and postcolonial identities shift. In the analysis provided in this paper, the two are not opposite poles, but in a constant dialogue with one another, where post-Soviet does not always correspond to postcolonial. The construction of a national identity through heritage, therefore, resembles a performance in which performers and audience – metaphorically and literally – are in a constant process of mutual shaping. The call to return is a complex and multi-layered act: eagle-

hunting and *Manas* recitation emerge as two practices in which voicing upholds bonds between human and non-human, and in which post-Soviet and postcolonial selves, like human and non-human, exist in an ebb and flow.

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