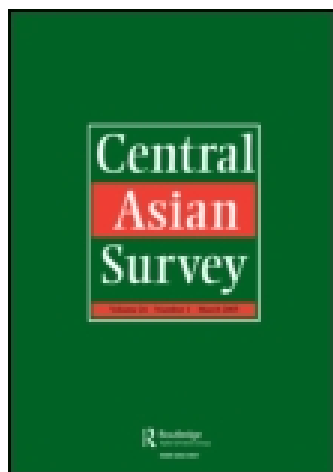




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Shamanism, Buddhism and epic hero-ism: which supports the identity of the post-Soviet Buryats?

ROBERTE N. HAMAYON

(Translation: Caroline Humphrey)

The disintegration of the Soviet regime has made it possible for minority ethnic groups to reconstitute for themselves a religious space which had been closed for 70 years, and thereby to redefine the symbolic references of their identity. All this has happened at a level that these groups did not know before. But what are the bases for this process? Doubtless the problem is different for each minority. We shall limit ourselves here to the Buryats, while keeping in mind the development of comparative studies dealing with other peoples of similar culture and demographic profile, such as the Yakut-Sakha.

Among the Buryats three systems of value were supports for ethnic identity in the past, each in turn and each in their own way: shamanism, lamaist Buddhism and 'epic hero-ism' (more precisely, an appeal to the epic of Geser). Each of these has returned to the scene today, as if signalling the three major facts of the present situation: the resurgence of shamanic practices and claims; the reopening of Buddhist monasteries; and the promotion of the heroic figure of Geser.

In effect, we are seeing not only the campaigns of older people to renew long-abandoned practices (or practices sporadically practised in a clandestine way), but also, we witness, even in the towns, a growing number of young people establishing themselves as priest-therapists. A great sacrificial collective ritual, the *tailgan*, was held in 1993 on the Island of Ol'khon. Another is to be carried out on the solstice of 1996 on the initiative of an association of shamans, together with a demonstration which claims part scientific and part practical functions (private communication from T. Skrynnikova and Ts. Vanchikova).

We are also observing the opening, or reopening, of Buddhist temples, thanks essentially to local private financial donations. Thus, there will soon be 18 new *datsan* (monasteries) according to Zhukovskaya (1995, p 39), who incidentally underlines the precariousness of their financial means and the weakness of their personnel establishment.¹

As for the activity around the figure of Geser, this was set in train initially under the auspices of the Buryat Republic government and it has given rise to the creation of the Geser Foundation. The Foundation's activities were manifest in 1995 mainly in a cycle of festivities, which culminated in July of that year with an international conference and also with the opening of an ethnographic and nature reserve in the Oka Valley, at the confluence of the Oka with the river Zambalok.²

Thus, the revitalization of these three systems of values seems to be flourishing. But before examining their respective positions and achievements in relation to ethnic and cultural redefinitions, which are certainly expanding, let me now make a brief remark about a notorious absence from the scene, in order not to have to return to the subject later. It is significant that despite being conscious of belonging to the Mongol world, no reference is made by Buryats to the Mongol Empire nor to its great founder, Chinggis Khan.³ Although the Western Buryats, notably the Ekhirit-Bulagat, remained apart from the Empire, which rejected this tribe as 'people of the forest', most of the other components of the present Buryat assemblage of tribes were brought into its fluctuating orbit in one way or another. The Buryats, if truth be told, seem indifferent to the imperial past of the Mongols, as they also are to current political and cultural processes in Mongolia; it is as if they wanted to detach themselves from their Mongol roots in order to singularize themselves as such in the wider family of Altaic peoples.

Certainly these questions of identity and ethnic cohesion are not new for the Buryats, who have been led to acquire self-consciousness by their long history. In the 17th century they had already experienced Russian influence. It penetrated Buryat society more profoundly in the west of Lake Baikal than in the east, where from the 18th century onwards Buddhism from Mongolia was actively propagated. The difference between these two spheres of influence ran up against another distinction: the Cis-Baikal Buryats consisted of rival tribes engaged in hunting, herding and agriculture, while those of Trans-Baikalia developed an extensive nomadic pastoralism of the Mongol type. The separation of the two was maintained under the Soviets and even enhanced: at the end of the 1930s the territories of Buryat settlement were diminished and divided into three different administrative regions. Today, one of the Buryat claims is for the unification of these three zones: the Buryat Republic (with 249,500 Buryats out of a total population of 421,600 in 1989), the Autonomous Region of Ust'-Orda in Irkutsk Province (77,300 Buryats), and the Autonomous Region of Aga in Chita Province in Trans-Baikalia (66,100 Buryats). Now this reunification is one of the explicit objectives aimed at by the cycle of Geser festivities, which was organized in such a way as to pass through all the principal regions one after another (see below). In this situation the government support given to these Geser activities is particularly significant, the more so in that this heroic figure only has a priori symbolic value for one quarter (the Buryats) of the population of the Republic. Should we deduce that the activities are a means, on the part of the authorities, to reclaim the territories detached in 1937 without clearly

making an open declaration, so as not to arouse suspicion from the Russian government?

I propose here to make a comparative examination of the three systems of traditional values in relation to their respective capacities to serve present claims (ethnic, religious, territorial, etc.). First the place of each system in the history of the Buryats will be briefly recalled. Under both the Tsarist Empire and that of the Soviets, the Buryats had no possible alternative status to that of a minority within a vast ensemble ruled by the power of the central authorities. Therefore, their identity was dominated by the values of resistance and adaptation, more than that of setting up as a counter-power. Today the possibility is suddenly offered to them to dream of unification, and inscription at a higher 'national' status level in the hierarchy (a level which, however, could never be that of a nation in the proper sense, given that they are a numerical minority in their own republic). We can thus enquire about the answers provided by the traditional systems of values to this new opportunity.

A brief historical survey

Shamanism

As the indigenous cultural base par excellence, Shamanism was never entirely renounced as such by the Buryats. In the 18th century, under the combined effect of the propagation of Orthodox Christianity to the west of Lake Baikal and Lamaist Buddhist to the east shamanism as a socio-religious institution began to be progressively squeezed from the centre and pushed towards the periphery. It ceased to regulate collective regular rituals and found itself limited to private and occasional rituals for the prevention and reparation of disorders: the conjuration of misfortune took precedence over the search for happiness.⁴ At the same time, the exercise of the shamanic function ceased to correlate with the central social position of highly valued masculine power, and became the expression of a form of shattered, feminized and denigrated counter-power. This initiated the end of it as an institution.

It was the policy engaged in by the Soviet regime in the name of 'militant atheism' that achieved the definitive disappearance of shamanism. Shamanism was condemned along with all other religions, but especially for the so-called 'charlatanism' of its practitioners and above all for the 'primitive and savage' character of its forms of expression, which was viewed as an 'obstacle to progress'.⁵

However, some shamanic elements managed to continue through the Soviet period. Thus, there persisted, while ceaselessly being readapted, a view of the world founded on a sentiment towards nature, and this could be maintained by means of minimal expressions, such as offerings left at mountain passes or springs or other supposed resting-places of the spirits. One has to admit that these offering-rites in the open air are often no more than excuses for bibulous halts for travellers—so much so that 'harmony with the natural environment'

tends to be no more than a vague idea, even for those who understand its link with shamanic tradition.

There also persist certain private practices with therapeutic and divinatory goals. The radical repression which struck shamanism during the 1930s did not prevent its sporadic clandestine appearance. The post-war period was marked by a certain tolerance on the part of the authorities towards private activities. Later the general image of shamanism rose again with the resurgence of the minority cultures in the 1970s, and we can speak of both an official acknowledgement and a great renewal of interest from the beginning of the 1980s. However, we must insist on two points. First, the forms of the shamanic practices that were maintained or which re-emerged never went beyond the level of the individual and circumstantial. Second, it is precisely because of this informal and supple character of shamanism that it was able to adapt. In other words, the absence of doctrine, of clergy, and of official cult sites which makes it institutionally fragile, is also what enabled shamanism to persist as a practice.

There also persisted an ensemble of representations linked to the souls of the dead, which was revived by the holocaust of the Second World War. The cult of the dead, whether formal or informal, has become a support for the transmission of traditions and for affirmation of ethnic belonging. Relations with the souls of the dead continue to have a shamanic character, even if they are now maintained directly and without a shaman as intermediary. In effect, the souls of the dead are neither divinized nor treated like images of saints; they remain entities perceived as analogous to the souls of the living and amenable to the same type of relations.⁶

Also, we can link shamanism further with a type of activity traditionally situated at the heart of the popular festivals of the renewing of nature: the *naadam* 'games'.⁷ Their shamanic origin is not obvious, as they have ceaselessly been transformed and directed towards different goals. The games were first transformed by the Buddhist clergy, which integrated them into rites performed under their direction. They were later transformed again by the Soviet authorities, which turned them into profane entertainments. The terms *naadam* refers to 'games' of two types, one represented by the dance (a round dance with singing) and the other by the wrestling-match, of which the symbolic values are those of virility, respectively sexual and combative. The association between them thus illustrates the link between the ideas of social reproduction and defence. It would be easy to demonstrate the originally shamanic character of these 'games'. They were formerly carried out by the members of the local community under the direction of a shaman. The shaman, for his part, also danced and wrestled, but in his own more or less improvised manner: he was entasked with 'playing' not with other humans but with animal spirits.

In fact, to the extent these games have been able to survive, this is in the degree they were carried out by the laity and deprived of all dimensions of shamanic expression. They were the privileged expression of traditional culture. They became popular entertainments which Buddhism was able to adapt and integrate. They later became the touch of local colour authorized by the Soviet

regime, according to the precept 'national in form and socialist in content'. Apart from their 'socialist' content, these games, precisely because they maintained their traditional form, could continue to be experienced as the expression of a general sentiment of renewal: the renewal of nature and society, and the renewal of life in general.

In this way the 'games' have continuously remained an indispensable element in local festivals. Their role as the emblem of tradition and identity has continued to grow, and it seems moreover likely to last, because the games do not require any religious or ideological baggage. They directly express the general notion of survival in symbiosis with the natural milieu.

Lamaist Buddhism

When Lamaist Buddhism appeared on the scene in the 18th century among the Buryats of Trans-Baikalia it held a considerable number of trump cards from the start. Arriving from Mongolia, it propagated the doctrine through the native language and it used indigenous proselytes (in 1712 there were 100 Mongol and 50 Tibetan missionaries) to spread the word among Buryat tribes which had themselves come from Mongolia or were similar to the Mongols in their extensive pastoral way of life. The common linguistic and cultural substratum allowed the clergy to move quickly from their initial violent proselytizing to a more moderate incorporation of certain local traditions (including part of the 'games'), and thus they were able to put such traditions to their own use in such a way as to obscure their own foreign origin. Similarly, the clergy, relying on a strong wealthy organization, knew how to climb on the back of the clan system and insert it into a dynamic of hierarchical centralization. They founded monasteries, which soon became centres of attraction for the nomads. Mongol writing spread. In brief, the process was generally associated with an economic, cultural, territorial and demographic blossoming.

Another reason for this rapid expansion is that Buddhism was encouraged by the Russian Empire: it was invited into Trans-Baikalia from the first at the instigation of the Tsarist government, the better to underline the frontier with China fixed by the Treaty of Burinsk of 1728.

Buddhism thus became an important political instrument in Russia, and it became so again, in the qualified form of neo-Buddhism, at the beginning of the Communist regime, when the clergy organized literacy classes in Mongolian. The expansion in the early Soviet years was remarkable: from 36 monasteries in 1917 the church grew to 46 in 1935. But then, during the russification campaign of the 1930s the number of lamas dropped from 16,000 in 1917 to 900 in 1936, and the monasteries were closed or destroyed.⁸ Two of them were reopened after the war, Aga and Ivolga. For a long time they were the only places where people could wear the national clothing. However, at these monasteries Buddhism was weak. In fact, generally, knowledge of the traditional script which was formerly the basis for the Buddhist culture, has become an exception among the population. During the 1960s and 1970s there was a resurgence of the open-air rituals (at the *oboo* mountain-shrines) which Buddhism had early taken over as a mark

of its influence. But the rituals were now without their Buddhist cover, 're-archaized', according to the authors of *Lamaizm v Buryatii* 1983. Moreover, these authors also remark on the almost general absence of knowledge of the fundamental precepts of Buddhism after a half-century of atheist Communism.

Epic hero-ism

Unlike shamanism and Buddhism, epic hero-ism does not form an institution, but rather appears as an ensemble of values manifested in a ritualized form of oral tradition. The execution of the epic is in effect in itself a fully ritual act. It is credited with symbolic efficacy, even though the heroic values are not directly enacted, as the bards are not thought to incarnate the heroes and no cult is addressed towards them. The symbolic import of the epic is particularly evident in the interdictions which have attended the recitation and written record of the epic from the 1940s to the present. These 'taboos' are stronger, and more dangerous if broken, even than those relating to the written version of shamanic invocations to the souls of the dead. This is because the values carried by the epic are fundamental ones. They, like the values invoked in the games mentioned above, refer to the perpetuation and defence of the self at all levels: the level of the individual, that of the local community, and that of the whole society.

However, it is neither the epic in general, nor all epics, which have been given an ideological role. It is one of them, or more exactly, one of their heroes, Geser. The name Geser was inherited from the Tibetan Geser, which was itself descended, as Stein (1959) has suggested, from the Latin Caesar. Thus the hero is in a sense borrowed, even if his adventures are not stereotyped, apart from some details and episodes. Geser's story has in fact numerous points in common with the stories of the heroes of other epics which are authentically Buryat. But the point of Geser is that he is the only one destined to be a chief. No doubt this chiefly destiny, the imposing of authority on one's country, played a role in the choice of the Roman Caesar as the heroic model, in preference, for example, to Alexander the Great, about whom legendary histories are also widespread among all the peoples of Central Asia. This chiefly destiny must also be an element in the way the hero played an emblematic role in the aftermath of the Second World War. As Kolarz writes (1955, p 16): 'The major target in the campaign against Buryato-Mongol nationalism after the war was not a writer or a living poet, but the legendary hero of the Mongols, "Geser".' The hero and his epic were first condemned, and then later relegated to the status of literary curiosity.

Three different forms of identity were produced in the history of shamanism, Buddhism and the heroic epic. Our task now is to see what has happened to each of them after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The present situation, revelation of assets and handicaps

The question of a national role for shamanism has never emerged openly among the Buryats, though it seems to have been posed by the Yakuts.⁹ In fact, the

private aspect of shamanism is the only aspect of shamanism to have been re-established as such today. Present as strongly in the city as in the countryside, this shamanism is both divinatory and therapeutic; it relates to health of course, but also to everything requiring luck: love, fertility, success, and most particularly these days, achievements in business.

As for the notion of harmony with nature, although it is often said to be part of the shamanic tradition, it is not considered characteristically shamanic. These days harmony with nature tends to be a value in itself, without any referent. In effect, because of industrial pollution, ecological preoccupations (with various ideological currents) have spread among all sections of the population. The ecological movements have overflowed well beyond the banks of Baikal where they originated.

Finally, the collective rituals of the sports 'games' have not in themselves acquired a more than local significance, although in neighbouring Mongolia the 'Three Manly Games' have become a national festival. In Buryatia it is only when they are combined with other events that one sees this type of 'games' take on a certain amplitude.

In sum, the shaman today does not take charge at a collective level. Perhaps the shaman's political limitations, linked to an incompatibility with centralized power,¹⁰ are in evidence. Perhaps also, the long propaganda associating the shaman with a primitive and savage state of civilization has left its mental traces, making it difficult for shamanism to constitute a valorizing referent. Is it not, in effect, a difficult enterprise to redress the negative image carried for so long by the person of the shaman, who was animalized by his costume, crying and gesticulating with a frenzy fit to have him taken for a madman? It is significant that those who say they are shamans today do not dress, nor conduct themselves, in this way.

These handicaps weighing on shamanism are compounded by its oral character, which is not incidental but structural. In effect, shamanic practice, which is 'inspired' (i.e. it takes as basic the personal relation which the practitioner is supposed to establish with the spirits), determines an absence of fixed texts in written form: each seance, whether it is divinatory or therapeutic, is claimed to be unique. Similarly, shamanic practice determines the personalization of the exercise: each shaman has his/her manner of doing things and accommodates this to each particular case. This is the key to the shaman's efficacy, which is of a magic type: it aims to make realities manifest in such a form that they can be mastered. Furthermore, to write shamanism, to erect a shamanic doctrine, or organize it along clerical lines, would be to make it cease to be itself, to deprive it of its specificity and its mode of efficacy. It is nevertheless the case that shamanism's deliberately oral and personalized character is its weakness in the contemporary world, because it affirms its dependency on the variable abilities of individuals and reveals its lack of accumulation of knowledge. Shamanism makes impossible all evolution, on pain of its own disintegration.

However, the status quo seems definitely to allow shamanism to survive in a viable form, though it is susceptible to challenge in a changing Buryat society.

Its marginalized, non-integrated practice perpetuates the presence of the most authentic tradition in intimate circles. Shamanism is experienced as the ultimate recourse, the one which is always able to provide a possibility for individual expression and for human victory over adversity. Shamanism is also felt to be the means par excellence of maintaining relations with the dead and thus of assuring a certain social and ethnic continuity.

In sum, the forms of present practice spare shamanism from toppling back into a bygone past, but they are not sufficient to lend it any other than a marginal presence in the life of the Buryat people today. Perhaps the idea that supernatural entities exist at the same level as the human soul, which characterizes shamanism, does not fit well with the national goals which are emerging in the present-day: does statism not demand a form of transcendence from its ideological supports? Also, perhaps the animist character of the shamanic view of the world is not favourable to the claims over territory made these days: will the spirits now attached to places insofar as they are natural remain attached to them when these places are the subject of industrial exploitation? In any case, the absence inherent in shamanism of all structure of functional organization prevents it from having a real political weight in this society, which has become more and more complex as it makes its full entrance into modernity.

As for Buddhism, can one speak of a renaissance? Certainly that is the impression given by the movement of 1988, leading to the creation of numerous small Buddhist communities. These were all subordinated to the spiritual Central Administration of the Buddhists, whose seat is at Ivolga (but the majority of them separated off later, Zhukovskaya, 1995, p 39). Similarly, a Buddhist Union of the laity was founded in February 1991, on the occasion of a congress of national spiritual renaissance. Composed essentially of intellectuals, it encouraged the publication of Buddhist tracts and work on Buddhism in Buryatia. In July 1991 the 250th anniversary of the official recognition of Buddhism in Russia was solemnly feted in various places in Buryatia in the presence of the Dalai Lama, who was on his fourth visit to Buryatia. In the enthusiasm, a bi-monthly journal titled *Buddizm* was founded (*Buddizm*, 1992). It is published by a society based in Moscow and aims to be a forum for all the Mongol Buddhist peoples of Russia.

In 1992 12 monasteries were active in Buryatia, of which 10 were reopened or reconstructed after 1990 under their former names (Tsugol, Gusinozersk, Kyren, Atsagat, Egituev, Murochin, Gegtuev, Annin, Sanagin, Ust-Ordynsk). Six more were added later, together with a sanctuary of the *dugan* type in the prison at Gusinozersk. There is undoubtedly a lack of cultural objects in these foundations, since so many items were destroyed in the 1930s, or put in museums from which it is evidently difficult to retrieve them. Only timid moves are being made to get them back. The higher Buddhist school established at the *datsan* at Ivolga in 1991 recruited only a few pupils and delivered the first graduates in 1996–97 (Zhukovskaya, 1995; p 39). Furthermore, the powerful clerical organization of former times seems unlikely to re-establish itself; nor does it seem able to mobilize an important part of the population. It was

curiosity rather than fervour that animated the participants at festivals held on the occasion of the Dalai Lama's visit. Contrary to general recommendations made in advance, few people wore national costumes to these events (Zuhkovskaya, 1992).

There has certainly been a misunderstanding with regard to the present turn to Buddhism. Even in pre-revolutionary times (whatever was written and said in the Soviet period), the implantation of Buddhism in Buryatia remained superficial. Linked to socio-political and economic motivations more than to properly religious ones, Buddhism was not able to assure a true penetration of the doctrine into popular thought.¹¹ Attendances at monasteries rose at the end of the 19th century, but this did not prevent people having recourse to shamanic cures and divinations, which were held to be more efficacious symbolically and to give greater possibility for individual expression.

Now it is indeed the quality of being a 'great religion' claimed by Buddhism which might present an interest for the Buryats in their time of constitution as a nation. However, this would not be a great religion in the ecumenical sense of the journal *Buddizm*, nor in the perspective of resurrecting ties with the other Buddhist peoples of Russia. Rather, the appeal would be the politically centralizing aspect, favourable for re-unifying the Buryat lands that had been dismembered in 1937, that is to say, with a particularizing ethnic perspective. The problem is that the universalist, or Pan-Mongolist, potentialities of Buddhism go against this Buryat perspective, if only because the religion belongs also, or even more, to other peoples!¹²

It is interesting to note the themes put forward today by those who propose a revitalization of Buddhism. Neither the return to the Mongol script, nor the republication of rituals (in Tibetan) ordered when Buddhism spread in Buryatia, figure. Rather, they encourage the publication of the great Indian and Tibetan works of Buddhist literature in Buryat. Invariably, the initial mobilizing theme seems to be ecological protection, something much emphasized by the Dalai Lama on his 1991 visit and taken up by the editors of the first issue of *Buddizm*. Note again that the most solemn episode of this visit took place at the stadium, where a wrestling competition, the prime sport of the traditional 'games', took place before the Dalai Lama's eyes. Finally, let us note that this visit was the occasion for the rehabilitation of two oppressed and mythologized figures of Buryat Buddhism, Agvan Dorzhiev, the ambitious reformer of the political aspect of the religion in the first quarter of the 20th century,¹³ and Dandaron, the reviver of the Tantric tradition in the 1970s (Zhukovskaya, 1992).

Unlike the figures of the Buddhist pantheon, which despite the establishment in Buryatia of a strong monastic organization, were always felt to have a foreign origin, the figure of Geser was and remains, entirely integrated in the traditional Buryat system of values, even though he also was in fact imported. Geser indeed is the favourite incarnation of this system. A series of festivals was organized to celebrate the epic devoted to this hero, and they illustrated the emblematic character attributed to him and the place assigned to him today in the project of reunification of Buryat territories. The description given below is based on the

Russian and Buryat press, and also on my personal correspondence with one of the principal organizers of these festivals.

The first official stage of the campaign to promote Geser as a figure of national unity was the decision taken by the Supreme Soviet of the Buryat Republic at their meeting on 15 November 1990, that is, just at the moment when Buryatia declares her independence and her transformation from Autonomous Republic into full socialist Republic. This decision led to the organization of a forum-festival dedicated to the Geser epic presented as the 'treasure of the peoples of Asia'. The forum took place in the summer of 1995 under the joint leadership of the Ministry of Culture, the Union of Writers, and the Buryat Filial of the Academy of Sciences. The decision also included a promise to support various preparatory festivities. The organizing committee of the festivals was headed by the President of the Council of Ministers of Buryatia, for whom a special Geseriade Directorate was created.

In the summer of 1991, and again during the summers of 1992 and 1993, there were local festivals in honour of Geser in the homelands of the most celebrated traditional bards (i.e. those of the late 19th and early 20th centuries). A banner, *tug*, is passed from one festival to another: it is inscribed in the vertical Mongolian script, which leads to the adoption of the Mongol pronunciation of the hero's name as 'Geser', rather than the Buryat 'Geher'. This banner clearly aims at promoting a leadership figure to rally the people. Consecrated for the first time on 17 August 1991 on the banks of the Angara River in the village of the bard Pyooxon Petrov, the banner was taken the following year to the region of Ust'-Orda (where it was feted by six villages in turn), and then it went to Ulan-Ude and to Yeravnin, at whose annual festival there are always participants from all Buryat regions.

The objective—and the itinerary of the banner and the festivities are abundant evidence—was to reconstitute symbolically the unity of all the Buryat territories. The banner is made of sky-blue cloth, recalling the celestial origin of the hero. Its right edge is cut into three tongues, which correspond according to various authors (and also to different positions taken by the same author) to four different symbolic evocations: (1) the three linguistic means of expression of the epic, Tibetan, Mongolian and Buryat, all emerging from the common cultural and spiritual heritage of the peoples of Central Asia; (2) the three regions where Buryats live, artificially separated in 1937, but all going back to a common sense of territorial belonging; (3) the three foundations of life, air, earth and fire; (4) the horns of a bull, symbols of its power with, in the middle, the 'path by which its force emerges'.

In the ceremony, the banner-holder and his companions are mounted on horseback, dressed in national costume. They go out to the countryside, generally to a mountain-top, as in rituals of olden times, and there they light a fire. This fire now serves to 'animate' the banner. Now 'animation', we know, is a ritual practised habitually in the past for shamanic drums, and it consisted of introducing a spirit symbolically into the drum.

The festival continues with benedictions and various speeches. Modern 'bards' take part, but their way of doing things is different from that of former days, even if their art still aims to glorify the hero by means of song. The ritual aim of the traditional execution of the epic was a complete narration, ritually defined specifically by the order of time: it was a duty to sing the epic when the Pleiades were visible in the sky, that is to say, at night-time during the period from October to April. It was absolutely forbidden to recite the epic by day and during the summer. Today, not only is the epic no longer sung, but even the festivities take place by day, in full summer, thus explicitly infringing the ancient rules of execution. One therefore cannot pretend that the festival is a revival of the traditional epic.

It could be suggested, on the other hand, that in its ceremonial aspect the festival is not so much a continuation of the tradition of epic performance as part of the tradition of *naadam*, the ritual 'games' of renewal, customarily held during the summer. It is significant that these festivals are called in Buryat *Geserei Naadam* (Geser's games), and that they include wrestling and archery competitions and horse races, as well as song and dance competitions, all of which underlines such a continuity. It seems, nevertheless, that the games, which formerly were at the heart of the Geser ritual, have now become secondary. The evocation of the figure of Geser is generally the main motif of the festival and occupies its centre. There is only one case to the contrary in my data: this was a festival honouring Geser held 'on the occasion' of an archery competition festival, *surharbaan*, the latter being presented as the main ceremonial theme.

The presence of the 'games' in the Geser festivals, and calling the festivals 'games', are significant facts in two ways. Games and epic recitals are vehicles for the same ideas. Both of them were traditionally performed periodically, thus both equally responded to the perennial need to assure general renewal, and they also have in common the fact that they express the feeling of necessary harmony with nature. It is also not surprising that the festival is held at a place marked by the presence of an *oboo*, a heap of stones serving as support for rites dedicated to spirits held to reside in natural places; alternatively, the festival enjoins participants to go to an *oboo* and make an offering there. One need not be surprised either at finding environmental protection mentioned in the programme of the Geser Foundation created in 1993. One also notes that the festival may finish with a collective visit to a near-by monastery, and this indicates the interest in reassembling people as widely and as generally as possible, which underlies the Geser project.

But this is not all. If the epic is presented as a common treasure of the peoples of High Asia, it is nevertheless the Buryat version which is accorded the honour of being the earliest: the Ekhirit-Bulagat version (from a Cis-Baikal tribe), transcribed by Zhamstarano from the bard Emegenei Manshuud in 1906, is universally recognized to be the most archaic in content. A scientific commission was invited to give a pronouncement about the date of its composition. The members considered that it could not have been composed later than the year 1000, since it takes no account of events happening later that shattered the

region, notably the propagation of Buddhism and the resistance to it, both of which appear in other versions (*Geseriada*, 1991). There is no space to discuss this dating here, given that it is clearly ideological: it was decided to hold a forum-festival precisely to celebrate this first millennium. The forum-festival was opened on 30 June 1995, with a short speech from the President of the Buryat Republic, who insisted on the spiritual value of the epic, comparing it to the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. The celebration continued over three full days, with numerous participants. It included meetings of specialists and games (called *surxarbaan*), various competitions, the opening of a reserve named after the hero, and the appearance of many publications. According to my informants, it was only economic reasons which limited its expansion further.

Some remarks are called for concerning the fact that the anniversary was chosen to be a millennium. We may begin by observing that this type of event is not a Buryat innovation. Stalin decided, at the beginning of the Second World War, to rally the Kalmyks and to honour them. He therefore made the year 1940 the 500th anniversary of their national epic, *Zhangar*, and its origin was fixed by the victory of the Oirat chief Esen Khan over the Ming army in 1440 (Bormanshinov, 1981). Circumstantial as it was, this initiative was not ephemeral: the Kalmyk city Elista naturally went on to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the epic in 1990. Let us note finally that the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* has also recently celebrated its millennium anniversary.¹⁴

The remote anniversary chosen by the Buryats allows them to assert independence from the Mongols, as well as to claim a certain temporal advance on their history, since the Mongols had to wait until the 13th century for Chingis Khan to surge into world history. This distant date is above all chosen to be in prior to the introduction of Buddhism in Mongol regions. An ancient date also seems necessary to justify in its turn another form of superiority, that of a geographical order. Manshuud's version of *Geser* emanates from the shores of Baikal, 'the luminous eye of the planet'. It is as if the *Geser* epic is 'the spiritual hypostasis of the deepest lake in the world' (*Soyol* 8, 1992). There is no space here to elaborate on the wider geographical questions involved. Briefly, the celebration of *Geser* near the Sayan Mountains and Baikal does not contradict, according to the Buryat historian Chagdurov (*Geseriada*, 1991, pp 73–88) the epic's being about a Turco-Mongol chief living far to the south in Amdo. This chief's glory arose from his opposition to the first propagation of Buddhism, around the 8th–9th centuries. One may suppose, writes Chagdurov, that despite *Geser*'s efforts, his people were conquered and forced to migrate to the north, as one knows that there were migrations to the north just after this period. In any case, it is a well-known fact that the epic of Manshuud contains the names of places, like Altai Xüxei, which recall the south.

Then, the attribution of an ancient origin to a literary monument expresses the claim to a long intellectual tradition. The affirmation of a literary heritage is all the more necessary for a minority people like the Buryats, who have seen their traditions 'folklorized' and relegated to minor forms of expression by Soviet cultural politics. On the occasion of the 'Geser Games', the Buryats glorified

their bards, as if to underline that their tradition contains not only great wrestlers, but also great intellectuals. And this glorification is linked, also at the 'Geser Games', with the rehabilitation of Buryat dissident intellectuals. It is thus interesting to note that this claim to have a long intellectual tradition is expressed only by reference to profiles of intellectuals/bards, and not by the substance of the epic tradition itself: the epics are not sung on these occasions, and only an approximation of them is given, in the form of exemplary excerpts in an epic style, with negligible precise content. The forum-festival of 1995 included a dramatic spectacle which showed the hero,¹⁵ but there is little information about this theatrical episode and we do not know which version it was taken from, the personages depicted, etc.

Moreover, according to most of the authors who support it, the millennial date promulgated refers only to the creation of the Buryat version of the epic (more precisely, to that of Manshuud), not to the date of the life of the hero. The hero remains in effect a mythic figure. It is significant that both the press and contemporary academic writings try to historicize the epic, but *without* making Geser himself a historical figure. It seems that Chagdurov is alone in affirming his historical existence. We should note that similar up-and-down adventures have befallen the Mongol Geser. His historicity has often been advanced and supported, notably in 1953, when a conference was held to rehabilitate him and his epic (they had been condemned in 1948–49 because of their status as the national emblems of the Mongolian peoples (Damdinsüren, 1957; Stein, 1959).

Reading them literally, the press articles on the recent Buryat Geseriade give the impression that they are celebrating the version, not the hero. Now, in fact it is not the epic text which is emblematic, but the hero himself, however mythic he may be. Besides, it is surprising to what extent the content of the text is ignored. Rather than presenting a society unified under a chief, the epic text taken down from Manshuud shows two camps in perpetual battle.¹⁶ Geser sets in train only certain victories, but he defeats one enemy only for another to appear.¹⁷ Thus, the chiefly action leads neither to the elimination of the enemy camp, nor to social unification under his own law. Geser is only a centralizing chief in the other versions, Buryat or Mongol, which are closely or more distantly linked to the Tibetan versions. So if Geser today is a unifying figure, this is at the price of detaching him from his feats recorded in the 'millennial' version, and at the price of having a global understanding of his personage transcending the variations found in different versions. Moreover, the ideal of internal unity projected onto the celebrated figure today is not in fact posed as such in the other Buryat versions either. It appears there only as implied by (or derived from) the ideal of resistance. This is explicitly conferred only on the hero, who has the task of fighting against invaders and grabbers, the *mangad*. Now, among the names of the *mangad* several recall Buddhist divinities and Christian prophets. Thus the enemies motivating the heroic action are clearly historicized, and it is the resistance they arouse that sets in train the centralizing dynamic.

In fact, what motivates the contemporary Buryat festivals described is the celebration of the hero himself. And he is manifest in all sorts of ways other than in narrative: in the 'animated' banner of his image or his spirit, in painted and appliqué portraits, or in the majestic throne set up for his theatrical ceremony.¹⁸

There is only an apparent contradiction in the question of whether people refer to the text or to the hero. To anchor a text in history without stipulating its content allows it to function as an ideological support while at the same time enabling its values both to have a root and to evolve. Not being written, the history of Geser can change, without losing him as the hero; and by this fact he can play his role of incarnating ideas and promoting them. This is also the reason why the enemies of the hero are historicized, while the hero himself is not.

Three remarks in the guise of a provisional conclusion

Rapid and incomplete as our survey of the possible supports for contemporary Buryat identity has been, one striking element does stand out. This is the persistence of the 'games' (above all the masculine competitions) in communal rituals, whatever their apparent religious or ideological bent. These games seem to be an inescapable element, even if they are no longer recognized as a central one, and even when they are no longer the explicit bearers of symbolic efficacy for general renewal as they used to be in their original shamanic context.¹⁹ The games are vehicles for the same general ideas as the epic stories and the epic heroes: the defence and perpetuation of society in its natural environment. But the means of conveying these ideas are different and complementary, the one being physical and the other intellectual. While the games put these ideas into play through the lived experience of the individual physique according to a repetitive procedure, the celebration of the epic of Geser, on the other hand, signifies their optimal personification according to a linear procedure implied by the dimension of historical claims. The existence of these parallel aims is why we need not be surprised that the figure of the hero, Geser, has been promoted by a series of festivals called 'Geser Games'. The ceremonial organization of these festivals has been able both to remain secular and to integrate certain aspects of religious traditions. It has been able to do this without having to choose between shamanism and Buddhism, without having to reunite them as such, and without expressing the least allegiance to one or the other. Thus, the visit to the monastery, the *datsan*, as part of the games festivities does not prevent the celebrants from evoking the epic glorification of resistance to all foreign invasions, including that of Buddhism.

The suddenness of these events doubtless makes it too early to judge other aspects. However, questions may be posed. Will the historicization of the epic have the effect of making it lose its supple oral character as it acquires the normative features of a text fixed in writing? Will the historicization of the epic be communicated also to the hero? Will Geser, who has now become not only the bearer of identity but also of ethnic history, cease to be a mythic personage? But these possible trends suggest at least that we need not speculate on his

eventual divinization! He might well have been described as descending from the sky in order to put an end to human ills in a Christ-like fashion, but for the time being it seems that such a perspective is not being opened for him. His glorification is not a cult.

The third remark is even more uncertain. This concerns the objective of reunification of the three population areas of the Buryats. This seems to have served as a definite crucible for the 'identity enthusiasm' which guided the Geser festivals in the immediate post-Soviet period. These festivals were the only demonstrations expressly to claim such an objective, since the shamanic and Buddhist discourses contented themselves with links to the ethnic sentiment of harmony with nature. But the reunification claim died down with the advance of the 1990s, as did the ecological movements in Buryatia and neighbouring parts of Russia. The aims of the forum-festival of June 1995 seem to have been entirely cultural.

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I also thank Caroline Humphrey, teacher and researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, for her useful remarks on questions treated here. However, the points of view expressed here are equally based on my own previous works, cited in the bibliography.

Notes and References

1. Caroline Humphrey (oral communication) notes that the majority of contemporary lamas continue to live a familial life and do not adopt the conduct or costume of a lama except within the limited context of the temple.
2. The name of this reserve is *Krai Gesera* and its Buryat name, written in Mongol writing on its signpost, is *Geser-un oron nutag*.

3. The present Buryat attitude to Chinggis Khan is a continuation of that upheld by the Soviet regime, at least after the repression of the pan-Mongolian movement definitively annihilated by the purges of the 1930s.
4. In its archaic form the essential object of the shamanic function was to obtain 'luck in hunting' for the hunters of the community. This idea is developed in Hamayon, 1990.
5. Such expressions are frequently found in the periodicals of the period such as the *Antireligioznik*, and *Voinstvuyushchii Bezbozhnik*. See for example the commentary of M. L. Beffa and L. Delaby on the militant anti-religious activities conducted in the 1930s among the Evenk by I. M. Suslov (*Études Mongols et sibériennes*, No 24).
6. This is an effect of one of the characteristics of shamanism, which treats the supernatural entities with which a soul can be in contact as being similar to it in nature and homologous in status. In the traditions of the Buryats and other peoples of Siberia in general these supernatural entities are either spirits which animate animals (as the soul of a man animates his body) or they are the souls of the dead.
7. See for example Hamayon, 1992.
8. See for example Rupen, 1964.
9. See Balzer, 1993.
10. This incompatibility is described, among other places, in Hamayon, 1990.
11. This is the conclusion expressly arrived at in the studies presented in *Lamaizm v Buryatii* (1983).
12. It should be noted that a certain number of Buryats are attracted these days by other expansive religious currents, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Baptists, and the Baha'i; and the other peoples of Buryatia have a great religious and cultural diversity, also in full flood: the Russian Cossacks, the Orthodox Old Believers, German Protestants, Jews, Evenk shamanists, Korean Buddhists, and so forth (Zhukovskaya, 1995).
13. See Rupen (1964) and Stoddard (1985).
14. In summer 1995, communication from Karl Reichl, Bonn.
15. Communication from Inge Denaeghel.
16. It is significant that the recent edition (1995) of the *Manshuud* text, with a new translation by A. B. Soktoeva, has a new title in Russian: *Abai Geser the Strong* (*Abai Geser Moguchyi*), though the Buryat title is *Abai Geser the Son* (*Abai Geser Xübüün*). The epithet 'son' is illuminating. In this variant Geser was sent to earth to take revenge on an enemy of his father. His actions are inscribed in a logic of vengeance internal to the society, and are not suited to the role of resistance chief called for today.
17. Notably the Buddhist deity *Iham rin*, one of the worst of the *mangad*, and the prophet Daniel, evoked in the name *Dan'il Sara Mangadxai*, but also Hitler, identified as *lobsogoldoi* (Sharxunaev, 1969, p 55).
18. Information from Inge Denaeghel.
19. The Cossacks and the Old Believers, who feel themselves to be as autochthonous as the Buryats, were angered that the founding of the city of Ulan-Ude was celebrated by holding these 'games'. They demanded that the Republic should henceforth be renamed as the Republic of Baikal, or Trans-Baikal.

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